

The **SEAL'S**
Treatment

HARTSVILLE'S SEAL HEROES BOOK FIVE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LESLIE NORTH

HARTSVILLE'S SEAL HEROES

The SEAL's Convenient Wife

The SEAL's Surprise Baby

The SEAL's Instant Family

The SEAL's Pregnant Roommate

The SEAL's Treatment

The SEAL's Hookup

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BLURB

She's helping heal his body, but what about his heart?

Physical therapist Kinley James loves helping her clients—until she accidentally discovers one of them is a Mafia hit man. Now she's seen too much, and that means her life is in danger. Good thing her sexy new client, Matthew Templeton, is a rugged Navy SEAL.

Matthew is struggling to recover from a serious injury *and* learn how to be a dad to his recently orphaned niece. He's committed to powering through his rehab so he can return to the job he loves—and he's less than delighted when Kinley warns that may not be realistic. Still, not only is she a warm and beautiful woman, she's amazing with his niece.

And there's not a chance in hell that he'll let any harm come to her.

At first, Kinley dismisses the increasingly dangerous “accidents” happening around her, but Matthew is worried... and neither can dismiss their growing attraction to each other. Can Matthew protect Kinley, and confess his feelings for her, before it's too late?

MAILING LIST

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(Hartsville’s SEAL Heroes Book Five)

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Matthew Templeton unstrapped his niece from the car seat, balanced her on one hip, and shouldered her Disney Princess backpack. The child-sized bag just fit over his arm. Since his still-healing right hand wouldn't grip the thin straps, it was the best way for him to carry it.

As they walked up the front steps to Kenton and Mia's Victorian-style home, Anaya turned her face into Matthew's neck. "Scared," she whispered.

"Nothing to be scared of, sweetie. These are my friends." And frankly, they were a godsend, stepping in to babysit for him like this—not that he expected a two-year-old to understand that. No, all Anaya knew was that Mommy was gone and everything was new and strange now.

He hated having to leave her in an unfamiliar house with people she didn't know, after all that had happened. Anaya seemed to have accepted that her mama wasn't coming home, but that experience had, understandably, left her uncertain and insecure at times. Matthew himself was still coming to grips with it—his older sister's death in a car crash three weeks earlier had walloped him, especially since it meant that the two-year-old in his arms had no one left in the world but him.

Growing up, it had only ever been him, his mom, and his sister. Mom had passed three years ago. And now Candace was gone, and she'd named Matthew as Anaya's guardian. The courts would make it all official once Candace's will was

through probate. The reality was already here: Matthew now had a child.

Not something he'd ever expected. He'd make it work, though. Somehow.

The decorative wooden door opened before Matthew had a chance to knock. "Hey, there," Kenton said. Behind him, his twin toddlers, Emma and Ava, dashed forward to see who their visitors were.

"Is it the girl to play with us?" Ava asked.

Anaya lifted her head, and the glimmer of a smile showed on her face when she saw the twins.

"This is Anaya," Matthew said.

"Come on." Emma gestured. "We're playing dress-up."

"Okay?" Matthew asked his niece, who was already squirming to get down. A second later, the girls ran into the living room. That was a relief. "I really appreciate this," he told Kenton. "I've got to get this physical therapy started."

"No worries. I'm a pro at managing little girls. I've read all the books." Kenton chuckled when Matthew shot him a skeptical look. "Okay, so I *did* read the books, but most of what I know comes from practical experience. She'll be fine."

"I figured as much, but it's the first time I've left her since I went to Charleston to get her." Matthew knew he had to get going. Still, it was tough leaving Anaya behind, even with a fellow SEAL who Matthew would trust with his own life.

"Go, take a couple hours for yourself, and see what Dr. James can do for your hand. She's the best."

"I know, I know. It's why I'm here." Matthew had temporarily relocated to Hartsville to work with the well-regarded hand specialist, but living near a number of SEAL buddies was good, too, especially after their last mission went sideways, causing the injury that sent everything spiraling off course.

He had to concentrate on healing, so he could return to active duty. His hand was better after the surgeries, but it was a long way from 100 percent. Every day he struggled to complete

basic tasks, and now with Anaya to care for... Life had thrown him some hella big curveballs in the past few months.

But he *would* get things back on track. He'd see what Dr. James prescribed for therapy and give it his all. He'd have a purpose then, which would be way better than the waiting around he'd done post-op and while the burns healed.

"Daddy, will you be the prince?" Emma ran to Kenton and grabbed his hand. The other girls followed. Anaya already had a crown on her head and a string of beads around her neck. She *was* fine, which meant Matthew could go.

"Give me a hug." He knelt down and opened his arms to her. She gave him a swift, tight hug before running off with the other girls.

"See you later—and take your time," Kenton called as he followed the kids into the living room. "I've got this."

Matthew let himself out and drove to the medical center. He checked in at the physical therapist's office and took a seat, keeping his eye on his phone to see if Kenton texted. He knew he needed to stop worrying. Anaya would be okay without him. He wasn't so sure how he felt being without her, though. A little lost, maybe.

The three weeks since Candace's death had passed in a blur. Two weeks spent in Charleston and then back to Hartsville to rent a house and learn how to care for a toddler. His buddies had all called with offers to help, but he'd wanted to keep it just him and Anaya at first. The social worker who interviewed him as part of the guardianship process had said that they needed to create a bond.

He thought they'd done that, and it had given him purpose and focus to care for her, even if he struggled with the physical aspects.

"Matthew?" a petite woman in black athletic pants and a bright blue shirt called as she came through a door.

"That's me." He stood and strode toward her, automatically sticking out his right hand to shake hers. It was a habit that he couldn't break, even when his hand had still been bandaged.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Dr. James—or Kinley, if you prefer.” She gave his hand a light squeeze, gentle enough not to hurt. He liked that she didn’t hesitate, that she didn’t treat him like he had to be handled with kid gloves. Her eyes left his face to track down his arm to where their palms met. Was she assessing him already?

“Follow me.” She led him past a small gym area to a medical consultation room. “We’ll be in here today for the assessment.” She turned and watched him enter the space, her head tilted slightly to the side. “Go ahead and have a seat on the table.”

He hated the padded tables with their crinkly paper, as well as the questions that he knew would be coming, but at least she was more pleasant than some of the military doctors he’d seen. He studied her as she flipped open a laptop. Her brown hair, pulled into a ponytail, looked soft and wavy. He found himself wondering what it would look like down. She had big, brown eyes that seemed to draw him in. And, while he was well aware she was his physical therapist, not a potential date, it was impossible for him not to notice how her fit, but curvy body moved as she walked.

Whatever he’d imagined Dr. James would look like wasn’t this, and she was years younger than he’d expected her to be, given the reputation she’d built in her field. About his age, if he had to guess.

She sat on a low swivel stool and turned her attention to him, her expression professional but warm. “I’ve read the reports from your surgeries and the notes from the Navy physicians, but I like to get a sense of the situation directly from the patient. I understand that it’s not a lot of fun to talk about, and that you’ve probably gone over it a million times already, but it’ll really help me help you if you tell me how the injury occurred.”

He raised an eyebrow. SEAL missions were classified, and this one was still under investigation by the brass because it had gone so wrong. His team member and friend, Sebastian Valenti, had made the ultimate sacrifice at that drug-processing

compound in Colombia. And Matthew wasn't the only one who'd ended up in the hospital.

"Just how you were injured," she said when he hesitated. "I don't need to know any specifics you can't tell me. This is about you, not about the mission. You already did your job there—now it's my turn to do mine, here."

Strangely enough, thinking of it that way helped. "All right." He ran his left hand over his face, trying to decide where to start the narrative. "I was... I was attempting to defuse a bomb that was ticking down. It was a complex mechanism, designed to... that doesn't matter. I had my right glove off for better dexterity. In the end, I stayed with it a little longer than I should have."

"So the force of the blast broke the bones and caused the burns?"

"Yeah, but I was also thrown backward and landed on my right hand." The pain had been so intense, he'd feared his hand had been blown off. He'd been damn lucky that it hadn't been—and that he hadn't sustained any other significant injury.

"That's consistent with what the initial X-rays showed," she commented. "All right. Can you tell me what outcome you're looking for from this therapy?"

Wasn't it obvious? "I need to get back to active duty."

"As a demolitions expert?"

"Well, yeah."

"Any other goals?"

"I recently took guardianship of my niece. Her mother, my sister, was killed in a car accident. Anaya's only two, so I need to be able to care for her. The hand"—he raised it—"makes helping her dress and tying her shoes tough." Among other things. Doing Anaya's hair was nearly impossible, but that was partly due to his lack of skill and experience.

"A two-year-old?" Her voice softened. "The poor child, to lose her mother like that. And you, too—your sister. I'm sorry."

He nodded. He was never sure what to say when people offered him sympathy. His go-to when he was uncomfortable was to crack a joke. Not in this situation, though. There wasn't any humor in it.

“Looking after a child is definitely challenging, but I think it's wonderful that you're stepping up to take care of her. I'll do whatever I can to help you get back the dexterity you'll need. For now, let's get started with the physical exam.” Her tone was matter-of-fact as she explained what she'd need from him. “Lie on your back for this first part. You're going to feel some discomfort, but if there's actual pain, you need to tell me.”

Matthew lay on his back with his right side nearer to her as she examined his shoulder and elbow, bending his arm in various ways. After several minutes, she had him sit up so she could take his wrist and turn it, flipping his hand over and back. When his breath hitched slightly, she paused. “Pain?”

“It's fine,” he said. “Don't worry about it, Dr. James.”

She shook her head, firmly holding eye contact in a way that said she meant business. “It's my job to worry about it. I'm going to work with the hand directly next. I need you to be honest with me about the pain level.” Her slim fingers felt around his wrist and palm. When she pressed into the base of his palm, a streak of pain shot up his arm—and from the look in her eyes, she could tell. He wasn't used to women he'd just met being able to read him that well, but he got the sense that those warm brown eyes never missed a thing. They were assessing, but, as the pain lessened, all he could see was how beautiful they were. He put the inappropriate thought aside.

“Squeeze my fingers.” She held out two of hers. He took them in his and squeezed lightly. “Go ahead. You won't hurt me.” He tightened his grip, but he could feel that it wasn't what it had once been.

“I lost some strength when my hand was bandaged up after the surgeries.” He didn't like appearing weak in front of her, but he'd recover what he'd lost. He had to: his future depended on it. The Navy was the only life he knew—the only one that had

been good for him, at least. He needed the discipline imposed by the military.

“Take this and grip it as tightly as you can.” She handed him a rubber ball to squeeze. He was able to dent, but not crush it. “Not bad. How about your ability to twist?” She reached into a bin and brought out a jar with a lid on it. “Can you open this?”

“Sure.” He complied without much difficulty. When she pulled out a plastic water bottle, though, he knew he’d met his nemesis. He’d been struggling with that sort of thing at home, unable to get his fingers to close around the small cap. He was going to try anyway. He gritted his teeth and gripped the cap, but he couldn’t get it to turn.

“Okay, good—that lets me know where we are,” she said as she stepped back and entered some notes on her computer. He scowled when he thought she wasn’t looking, annoyed with himself, but she must have caught him, because she gave him a wry smile when their eyes met again. “Hey, we all have to start somewhere,” she reminded him. Flushing, he nodded.

For the next several minutes, she examined his fingers, working each joint and rotating his thumb. She kept her focus on his hand, which gave him the chance to study her. A soft fragrance, maybe perfume or shampoo—something light and floral—scented the air around her. He liked it. He liked the way she caught her bottom lip between her teeth when she was concentrating. For the first time since his injury, he was actually enjoying someone working on his hand.

Finally, she took a step away to type on her laptop again, then looked him in the eye.

“Well then, let’s start with the hard part. Based on my experience, I think it’s unlikely that you’ll be able to regain the level of fine motor skills to return to your previous post.”

Matthew froze, feeling like the bottom had just dropped out of his world. He could barely hear her as she continued talking.

“I’m sorry. I know that’s not what you want to hear. The good news is that there *is* a lot of room for improvement here. If we focus on occupational therapy, I’m confident that you’ll be

able to master all the everyday activities you'll need to live productively and be a better caregiver to your niece. And, if you want to stay in the Navy, I expect they'll have some options for you that will be well within your new skill set."

What the hell? She couldn't dismiss his chances of recovering full use of his hand so quickly. He wasn't accepting that.

"What do you mean by *unlikely*?" he demanded. "Give me the odds." What were they talking? Twenty percent chance of full recovery? Ten?

She sighed. "You wouldn't like the number I'd put on that. Let's just say they're stacked against you."

"Maybe, but I've beaten lousy odds before." At seventeen, it had looked like he was headed for a life of crime. Thanks to his high school principal, some tough love, and one hell of a lot of determination, he'd changed course. Joining the Navy had been pivotal in that, and when he'd taken his position on his team, he felt like he'd finally found the home he'd always been looking for. He wasn't giving his career up without a fight.

"Let me explain." She turned the laptop so he could see the screen. He listened, just barely keeping a veneer of politeness, as she went over the exact nature of his injury and where—she said—his hand was irreparably damaged. Some of what she told him, he'd heard before from the Navy doctors, but she got more into the details.

Still... "I'm not convinced," he said when she was done. "I'll do whatever you say I need to. You can push me. I can take it." Accomplishing hard things was his job as a SEAL. The same principles applied here.

"I'll be happy to work with you to achieve as much as possible, but I want you to have realistic goals for yourself, or you're just going to be setting yourself up for disappointment. It's my job to help you—and part of that means not lying to you or giving you false hope. Your life is going to be different now—that's a fact. But it's not over, and that's a fact, too." She met his gaze. "I know it may not seem so right now, but in the big picture, you're very lucky. When you consider all the

things you're capable of, only a very few items have been knocked off the list."

"One of them just happens to be my job." That didn't seem at all lucky to him, though he saw her point. He could have been injured more severely—or been killed, like Sebastian. Compared to that, what did he have to complain about?

Just the minor issue that he couldn't do the thing he'd trained to do, was good at, and loved.

He focused again on the word "unlikely." That wasn't "impossible." If there was a chance...

"Will you work with me to achieve as much as I can?" he asked after a long silence. He wasn't thrilled with her diagnosis, but she was one of the best hand rehabilitation specialists on the East Coast. He'd come to Hartsville for her expertise, and relocating again wasn't an option. He didn't want to cause more upheaval in Anaya's life by pulling up stakes again so soon.

"Of course. I'll put together a regimen for you—and I'm sure, given your background, you're aware of the importance of following that regimen to the letter." She pointed her finger at him, and her voice was firm as she continued, "We need to be clear from the outset, though, that undoing the damage you took isn't possible. What happened is part of you now, and one way or another, you're going to be carrying it with you wherever you go. Trying to turn back the clock isn't going to work, and it will just lead to frustration."

"Fair enough." He didn't like it, but he'd have to accept what she said for now. And then work on proving her wrong. He could and would become the man he'd been before—the capable expert who excelled at his job. He refused to accept any other option. "When do we start?"

"This week. My receptionist will book your appointments. She's out this afternoon, but she'll call you."

"Thanks, Doc." Matthew strode out of the office with grim determination. He'd show her what a SEAL could do when the deck was stacked against him.

He stopped at the grocery store for a few items—it was astonishing how often he ran out of essentials with a toddler in the house—and gritted his teeth when he had to struggle to close his fingers around the handle on the plastic bag. He persevered, though, and finally succeeded. See, he could do this. He could do whatever he had to.

His attitude took something of a hit when he picked up Anaya, who wanted to stay longer to play with her new friends and shed a few tears about it on the way home. He struggled with comforting her, since he didn't always know the right thing to say. And that was just one of a whole host of challenges. He was still working out how he'd manage Anaya's care when he deployed. In fact, that was the one silver lining to being stuck doing rehab for his hand: at least he knew he'd be in town for a while, and he could use that time to find a longer-term solution. Solving problems was his stock in trade, after all.

For now, he wanted to get back to the small ranch house he'd rented and get through the evening.

He pulled into his driveway and was just climbing down from his truck when he spotted a woman stepping out of a car at the next house over. He hadn't met his closest neighbor yet, and he wasn't sure this was a good time.

Then he recognized the bright blue shirt. Dr. James. She'd let her hair down. And, damn, it was just as pretty as he'd thought it would be. For a second, he even thought he caught her scent on the breeze, and he felt his heart rate kick up a notch. It had been a long time since he'd been with a woman. Just another thing to be frustrated about.

He shook it off. He didn't need any more complications, not on top of the ones he was dealing with already. He opened the rear door of the extended cab to find that Anaya had fallen asleep with her head leaning against the side of the car seat. Seeing her that way calmed him. She was so sweet. He'd adored her since she was born, and he was going to do his best by her.

Somehow, he was going to do that and recover the use of his hand—no matter what a certain pretty PT thought.

“That’s it. Keep working your hand,” Kinley encouraged her patient. “Is it any easier today?”

Frank Smit was going through the exercises she’d started him on during their last session.

“A bit,” Frank grumbled. His focus was on his hand, as if an act of will could make the muscles and tendons heal.

Despite the older man’s sometimes surly attitude, Kinley found him easy to work with, which was why she’d agreed to do his therapy in the home he’d rented in Hartsville. He’d suffered a terrible accident that injured his hand and broken both his legs. His legs had mostly healed and his overall mobility was improving, but his hand still needed significant work.

“Okay. You can take a short break,” she said when he’d completed the current set of reps. “Let me take a look.” She did a quick exam, noting some progress in the past week, though his grip strength and fine motor skills were still subpar. His muscles were skewing to the left as well, which concerned her. She was going to have to think of a way to balance that. She bit her lower lip as she concentrated.

“I know that look,” Frank said, his tone wary. “What’s the matter?”

“I’m just thinking up new ways to address your remaining challenges.”

“The sooner the better. I gotta get back to work, and I need my hand.”

Everyone said that to her, and she counseled patience... but that seemed to be in short supply among the men she'd treated lately. She'd been surprised when she caught sight of Matthew Templeton carrying his niece into his house the evening before. She hadn't expected him to be living next door to her.

“I hear you.” She turned her attention back to her current patient. “Let's work on the thumb next.” She showed him another exercise and watched as he performed it. The process was slow and gave them time to chat. Idle conversation wasn't the part of her job she excelled at, but she'd learned early on that it was necessary to share some things about her life and ask about the patient's.

Trust was an essential element in the therapist-patient relationship, and it was easier to build when the clients felt like they had connected with her on a personal level. Frank was a bit of a special case, since he was pretty reluctant to open up about his private life, but he had a certain charm under his gruff exterior that made conversation flow easily, as long as they kept it light.

“You get your car in to the mechanic?” he asked. The last time they'd met, she'd told him her brakes were squeaking.

“I did. He said I've got a few thousand miles yet before I need a brake job.”

“Get a second opinion,” Frank suggested.

“I trust the shop I took it to. I haven't had any reason not to.” She was only slightly concerned about the brakes. “Besides, I don't have time right now.”

“Can't let those things go.”

“I know. Here, like this.” She corrected his form. “It's on my list of stuff to deal with this summer, along with organizing my shed. It's gotten pretty messy.”

“You probably don't need half the stuff that's in there. That's always the way of it.”

“You’re probably right,” she said, biting back a sigh. She *wanted* to need all the things she’d stored away in there. Someday she would. She had to believe that.

She stayed another fifteen minutes, teaching Frank two new exercises that he could do without her help. “Twice a day, morning and evening if possible, but don’t overdo it,” she cautioned as she packed away the grips, balls, and other therapy tools she’d brought for their session. “I know you want to get back to work as soon as you can, but you can cause damage if you press yourself too hard, and that’ll just slow down the recovery process. I’ll see you in a few days, and we’ll see how things are looking then.”

She said goodbye and let herself out as she usually did, wanting to spare Frank the extra steps to the door. She’d just backed her car into the street when she realized she didn’t have her phone. She must have left it in the house. She parked again, went to the door, and knocked, but there was no answer.

Shoot. She couldn’t leave without her phone. She was about to knock again, harder, when she noticed that the door wasn’t fully closed. That was her fault. She knew it was finicky and needed to be pulled firmly shut, particularly in the early summer humidity.

Maybe she could just...

She was usually too polite to walk into someone’s home uninvited, but she’d been inside less than five minutes ago, and if she could save Frank a few steps, that would only be the kind thing to do, right? She pushed the door open and spotted her phone on the side table. She must have put it down when she shifted her bag to open the door on her way out.

She stepped into the entryway and had her hand on her phone when she heard Frank’s voice coming from the kitchen. She was about to call out to let him know she was there when she realized what he was saying.

“Hey, I’m a professional. The gun’s safe, and there’s no evidence anyone will find.” His tone was hard-edged, with none of the good humor he often displayed in their interactions.

Kinley froze. Surely she hadn't heard that right.

"Yeah, yeah," Frank continued. "But even though it didn't go smoothly, the mayor's off the table, just like I promised. You've got nothing to worry about."

Off the table? Surely that didn't mean what it sounded like. But... a gun? Evidence? She shuddered.

She was not meant to hear this. She dashed back out the door, pulling hard to shut it tight behind her. Too hard. She winced. Praying Frank hadn't noticed, she drove away as quickly as possible.

She navigated a few blocks before pulling to the curb, hands trembling where they gripped the wheel. That conversation might have been perfectly innocent. It was just words, after all, and maybe she'd misunderstood.

But what if she hadn't?

She thought about what she knew of Frank. He was built like an ox and had his share of scars. His nose had clearly been broken a time or two. That didn't mean he was guilty of anything, though. He'd just had a rough life.

But she couldn't forget the menace she'd heard in his voice. Nor could she forget how evasive he'd always been in response to any personal question. He kept saying he needed to get back to his job, but he'd been vague about what that job was. He'd also avoided mentioning where he was from or talking about his family. All she knew was that he'd been in an accident—that he refused to describe in detail—and that he was itching to get back to... something. Something dangerous? Something deadly? She didn't know, but the possibilities worried her.

She debated for another few minutes before placing a call to Brendan Hogue, a detective with Hartsville PD. He had been one of her first patients when she'd started her practice in town, and they'd become friends.

"Hogue here."

"Hi, Brendan. It's Kinley." She was grateful to hear his voice.

“Hey, how’s it going?”

“Well, that’s the thing. I had a strange encounter just now, and I wanted to get your take on it.” She told him about what she’d overheard and waited while he seemed to process it. “It seemed suspicious to me,” she added. “But I don’t know. You’re the professional here.”

“Yeah, I can see why you’d be concerned, but it’s possible there’s a perfectly innocent explanation. Especially only hearing one side of a conversation, it’s easy to get the wrong idea. You did the right thing by calling me, though. I’ll look into it, just to be on the safe side,” Brendan said. “In the meantime, if he makes you uncomfortable, you can always drop him as a client. You’ve got that right.”

“That’s true.” She’d only ever done that when she felt that a client wasn’t taking the rehab process seriously, never due to personal issues, but she appreciated the reminder that she didn’t have to keep interacting with Frank if she didn’t want to. “I think I will. Thanks for your time, Brendan.”

“I’ll get back to you if I find anything to be concerned about. Otherwise, try not to worry about it too much.”

“I’ll try.”

As she drove the rest of the way to her house, she replayed what she’d heard Frank say. Was her imagination just running wild? She shook her head. True, she’d only heard a short bit of his conversation, but there had been... something dark in his voice. As unlikely as it seemed, she couldn’t help thinking that he’d sounded like an enforcer—someone willing to dish out violence if the situation called for it. She’d always tried not to judge people by their looks, but this was more than that. Wasn’t it?

It might all mean nothing, she concluded, but Frank could find himself a different therapist. She wasn’t going back to his house. She made that determination just as she pulled into her driveway.

Her eyes went to her neighbor’s house. The truck she’d seen Matthew getting out of the day before was there. That was

another frustrating situation. It wasn't unusual for patients, particularly younger men, to refuse to accept that they were going to have permanent limitations. After sufficient therapy, Matthew shouldn't struggle at all with normal daily activities, but being able to defuse a bomb or do whatever it was SEALs did when deployed? Highly unlikely.

She'd taken no joy in telling him that, and she was concerned about his reaction. His brand of aggressive determination could be detrimental to his long-term recovery. He needed to be open to accepting what his new reality would look like, or he'd cause himself more problems. She'd seen it happen before.

At their next session, she'd try to broach the topic again and get him to understand that it wasn't helpful for him to get in the way of his own healing. He obviously knew how to work out and work hard, if his muscular six-foot frame told her anything. And he'd been sweet, with his surprisingly soft brown eyes.

Until she'd given him her assessment. His eyes had sharpened then, taking on a look of stubborn determination that sent up warning flags in her head. He was clearly intending to approach his therapy like some kind of no-holds-barred mission, and injured bodies just didn't work that way.

She let herself into her house and dropped her bag by the door. Maybe she'd been too blunt with him. She could have finessed what she'd said more... but that wasn't who she was as a therapist. It was a delicate balance, being realistic with patients about their goals without coming across as cold or harsh, but it was one she worked hard to maintain. It was important that her patients know she was on their side and would be there to help them achieve their targets—but she couldn't let them fall into the trap of unrealistic expectations. That wouldn't be fair to them. It was *because* she cared about them and wanted them to succeed that she wouldn't fill them with false hope. It would just let them down in the end.

She moved into her house, trying to leave work at the door along with her bag. She flipped open her home laptop to check

her email. Scanning quickly, she saw a message from her mother, another from a college friend, and a host of ads.

“Damn,” she muttered. The one email she wanted to see wasn’t there. She’d been hoping for a response from the adoption agency she’d been working with for over a year. Feeling a bit desperate the night before, she’d emailed her contact there to ask if the woman thought changing her profile would help.

Kinley was tired of disappointment. She’d done everything right, and her application should be a strong one. She was single, true, but she had a great income and a lovely home. She even had her sights set on the day care service she’d use. Plus, she was a doctor, for God’s sake. Not an MD, but still, she’d gone through rigorous training and would be well equipped to deal with any minor childhood injuries. Shouldn’t that carry some weight?

It hadn’t, because she’d been passed over time and again. She slammed the laptop closed and squeezed her eyes shut. She just wanted a child of her own. Was that too much to ask? Apparently, it was.

What a craptastic day!

She needed to do something productive, something that returned a soothing sense of order to a life that felt like it was spinning out of control. She walked to her back door and picked up her gardening gloves. Pulling weeds was a task that checked both the productivity and orderliness boxes. It always settled something in her heart to take something messy and chaotic and make it neat and orderly. She couldn’t fix all the world’s problems, but she could fix this little patch of garden and see it thrive as a result.

She worked along the fence in her backyard, pulling a few weeds from around the geraniums and petunias she’d planted a month earlier. By the time she straightened after several minutes, she was feeling better.

Until she looked over the four-foot-high fence into Matthew’s yard. The little girl she’d seen him getting out of a car seat the day before was sitting on the ground, squeezing clumps of dirt

between her fingers. Was she alone? Kinley looked around and didn't see Matthew or any adult.

How dare he leave a child unattended? When Kinley saw the girl lift her dirt-filled hand to her face as if she were going to eat the mud, she couldn't take it. She marched to the gate separating the properties and flung it open.

She was headed toward the girl when she caught sight of Matthew sitting on the deck with a magazine or puzzle book open in his hands.

"What's the matter with you?" she demanded. "She's going to eat dirt. Do something." Maybe on another day, she'd have been calmer and more reasonable, but right now, this was too much. He had a child in his care—the one thing she wanted more than anything in the world—and he couldn't even be bothered to keep her safe?

Matthew looked toward the girl, who was smiling at him as dirt oozed from between her fingers, before swinging his attention back to Kinley. "It's just a mud pie. Kids have been making those for centuries."

"But... but." Kinley ground to a stop. As she watched, the little girl's hands went up to her mouth... and then, after a brief taste, the girl made a "Yuck" face and went back to playing with the mud without trying to eat it.

That... was what happened with kids, wasn't it? They tried something, figured out if they liked it or not, and moved on. What had she been making such a fuss about? Her fury deflated, leaving her feeling tired and achy. She brought her hands to her shoulders and stretched her neck, trying to ease out the stress. She closed her eyes and sighed.

"Are you okay?" His voice was gentle—and way closer than he'd been just seconds earlier. "You seem a little... wound up."

She opened her eyes and stared at him while words struggled to form in her head. His eyes were soft again, like they had been during her initial assessment of his injury. She could see deep laugh lines around his mouth and wondered about that

other version of him—the man who laughed easily and often. But then she pushed that thought aside. It was none of her business. Likewise, he didn't need to hear about her problems. And she shouldn't tell him. He was her neighbor and her patient, and that was it.

She pulled her shoulders back and put on a smile. "I'm fine. Just a bad day. Sorry to bother you."

"You didn't bother me. Do you want to meet my niece?"

She did, so very much, but she couldn't. Not then. Not after the radio silence from the adoption agency and everything else that had happened that day. "Another time. I'll see you at your next appointment."

"Tomorrow, then."

"Right. Enjoy your evening." She kept her fake smile in place until she got through the gate and closed it behind her.

Matthew wiped sweat from his brow. Who knew that working his hand and fingers could have him panting like he'd just run a 10K? Make that a hilly 10K.

He glanced Kinley's way. She was on the other side of the treatment area, typing notes on a laptop, occasionally referring to a pad of paper she'd used to record info during their session. If he'd expected her to treat him differently today, he'd been wrong. Apart from greeting him with, "Call me Kinley, please. Since I barged into your backyard last night, I think we can drop the 'Doctor,'" she had been nothing but professional. Still kind, but very by-the-book. He stretched the fingers of his right hand, savoring the soreness that told him he was rebuilding strength and flexibility. That was what he was here for, after all.

"I've printed out some exercises you can do at home." She handed him a sheet of paper. "Let's go through them once before you go, to make sure you understand."

He scanned the paper that had directions and diagrams for three exercises, then performed each for her inspection. "Is this it? There must be more I can do. I'm used to a lot of physical activity."

"Overexertion will only impede your progress and could even do additional damage. Do these twice a day, every day, including on the days when you come to therapy. You can do other types of workouts, of course. Just make sure they don't put stress on that hand."

He forced his shoulders to relax. “Yes, ma’am.”

“I mean that. Don’t rush this.”

He leveled a look at her. “I have goals to accomplish.”

“Like being stubborn,” she muttered.

“Determined,” he corrected.

She sighed and sat down on the bench with him. “I know you have wider goals, but I strongly encourage you, at least for now, to focus on therapy to maximize your ability to perform daily activities. Consider how OT would make it easier for you to function. This would be practicing specific tasks that you need to perform, like using a knife to prepare food or opening different-size containers. During our initial assessment, you mentioned that caring for your niece was a priority for you. Toddlers are hands-on—literally.” Yeah, he’d figured that out quick enough, but he didn’t appreciate Kinley’s tactic. She was using what she knew about him to maneuver him. “Oh, there is one other thing you could do if you want to exercise your hand between sessions: knitting and crocheting can be excellent for that, though you still need to be careful not to overdo it. I know the stereotype is that those crafts are just for women, but a lot of men find them very enjoyable as well.”

“No.” Or, more accurately, hell no. He wasn’t going to sit in front of a fireplace in a rocker, knitting socks. But on one point, he *could* give a little. “I’ll consider some other form of OT if I need to.”

He’d never felt his loyalties so divided. Anaya needed him... and so did his team. But Anaya needed to take priority right now, so maybe focusing on OT first made sense.

After he left Kinley’s clinic, he drove to the daycare where Anaya was. It had been her first day there. Dropping her off, even for just the few hours he was away, was rough on him. But she’d gone in willingly, so he was hoping for a good report.

He showed his ID at the door, since not all the employees knew him yet, and was told Anaya was in the green playroom

down the hall. Before he reached it, he was intercepted by Tricia, the center's manager.

"I wanted to catch you, Mr. Templeton. Anaya had an accident about an hour ago." She spoke quietly. "She got too busy playing and waited until the last second. We'll be more careful about getting her to the bathroom in the future, but we'll need you to pack her a change of clothing or leave a spare set here."

Anaya had been almost potty trained when her mother was killed. The social worker in Charleston had warned him that a trauma in her life might set her back, but Anaya had done surprisingly well in the weeks she'd been with him. Until now, apparently.

"Will do," he promised. "What's she wearing now?"

"We have some extra items, of course," Tricia assured him, "but kids are more comfortable in their own things."

"Got it."

Thirty minutes later, when Anaya was running around the kitchen in only a T-shirt and her princess underpants, he had to admit that he hadn't "got it."

How in the hell did parents make a decent meal when kids were being kids? How did they get kids to put on pants if the kid didn't want to?

When Anaya skidded into him for the third time while he was trying to chop vegetables, he threw in the towel. Using the knife with his left hand was awkward enough. Doing it when a toddler decided he was a jungle gym? Impossible.

Pizza. Again. He'd pacify his conscience by getting mushrooms, peppers, and tomatoes on it. Those were healthy, right?

He placed the order and entertained Anaya by reading "Cinderella" twice while they waited for the food to arrive.

"Outside," Anaya said with a stubborn set to her jaw when he put the pizza on the kitchen table.

"You want to eat outside?" It was a good idea, since the evening looked soft and beautiful. But she still wasn't wearing

pants. He saw his opportunity for leverage. Maybe that's how this was done. "I'll make you a deal. You put on pants, and we'll eat outside."

Anaya dashed off to her bedroom and returned with a pair of pajama bottoms. Good enough. He helped her squirm into them, and outside they went. The pizza was good, but the conversation was lacking. Anaya mostly talked with her stuffed pink pony, which was okay with Matthew, since knowing what to say to a child this age was tougher than it looked.

When Anaya was finished eating, she decided to take Pansy, the pink pony, for a gallop around the yard. Matthew took the leftovers inside, leaving her for just a minute. He returned to see Anaya wriggling under the gate. He stalked over but stopped short before going through into Kinley's yard.

He'd noted when he first moved into the house that his neighbor had a green thumb. In the evening light, Kinley's yard looked like a fairyland. Shrubs, ornamental trees, and flowers combined to create a beautiful landscape. White lights glowed in some of the trees, and in the pink haze of evening, he was enchanted by it all. And he could see that Anaya was, too. She was standing a few feet from the gate, gazing around in wonder.

"Hi there," he heard Kinley say. "Your pony is very pretty."

He should intervene. Anaya had no business being in Kinley's yard. He went to open the gate, but Kinley waved him off with a smile.

"Pansy," Anaya said.

"Is that her name?" Kinley took off her gardening gloves before stroking the pink pony's head. "How lovely. I have some pansies in my garden. Do you want to see?"

Anaya nodded and took Kinley's offered hand. Together, they explored the garden, stopping to look at flowers and the little ornaments that were placed here and there: a stone rabbit, a terra-cotta birdbath, a reflective green ball, and tiny winged fairies that perched on the edges of pots.

Anaya appeared to be in heaven as she babbled to Kinley. The little girl's face showed more delight than Matthew had seen since Candace had died. He slipped through the gate but kept his distance, not wanting to interrupt the magic of the moment. Finally, it seemed that Pansy wanted to race around the garden. As Anaya galloped along with her pony, Kinley made her way to him.

"Have a seat," she said, with a gesture to two white wrought-iron chairs. "We'll be able to keep an eye on her from here."

"You're really great with kids." His comment didn't seem enough, based on what he'd seen. She was amazing.

"She's sweet." Kinley looked much more relaxed than she had been the evening before in his yard, or either of the times he'd been at her office.

"She is, but I have no idea what I'm doing," he admitted. "Is cereal best for breakfast? Or should I make toast? Cut the crusts off or not? It's a guessing game."

"New experiences."

"Yeah. New and different. My life was pretty routine before."

She laughed softly. She looked lovely, even with a smudge of dirt on her cheek. "Defusing bombs is routine?"

"It's what I trained to do." That and a whole lot of other things that he couldn't legally disclose to Kinley.

"I imagine you have other skills as well," she said, keeping her focus on Anaya, who plucked a blossom off a plant and rubbed the pink petals between her fingers.

"Sorry about that," he said and opened his mouth to call for his niece. Kinley's hand on his arm stopped him, and he felt a spark of electricity jump between them. She'd touched him multiple times during their sessions, but this felt different. He drew in a breath and reminded himself that it was just the setting in the romantic garden. Nothing more. She withdrew her hand, her eyes meeting his for a second. Had she felt the spark, too? He couldn't tell.

“Flowers are meant to be picked,” she said. “I don’t take blooms into the house often enough.” They sat in silence for several minutes as they watched Anaya wander in the garden, collecting more flowers. Finally, Kinley spoke again. “It must be odd to have a child in your life unexpectedly—and for such a tragic reason—but she’s a darling. She’s lucky you can be there for her, and you’re lucky to have her. It’s something I’ve wanted for a long time.” Her voice was so soft he wasn’t sure he heard her last words.

“A child?” He studied her face.

“I’ve been trying to adopt. It’s not going well.” She gave him a faint smile, but he could see unshed tears in her eyes.

On impulse he stood, took her hand, and pulled her up with him, wrapping his arms around her. She stiffened for a second, but then she relaxed into the hug and pressed her face against his shoulder. He half expected to hear a sob, but there was only the sound of crickets chirping in the falling twilight.

“Thanks, I... I needed that.” She broke the hug and stepped back.

“Sure. I better get the bedtime thing started with Anaya.” He couldn’t have said why he’d hugged Kinley, but it had felt right to hold her and soothe her.

That was out of character for him. He was more likely to crack a joke to mitigate tension than to offer comfort. That and the earlier spark between them made him wonder as he picked Anaya up and went back through the gate to his house. He’d been attracted to Kinley from the moment he’d first seen her, but her no-nonsense business demeanor did a good job of keeping distance between them. Here in her garden, when she looked so sweet, though... he’d have to be careful, or he might find himself liking her a little too much.

Kinley took a few deep breaths before picking up her office phone to call Frank Smit. She should have done it sooner, but she'd put it off and now he'd probably be—legitimately—irritated that she was canceling with only a few hours' notice. She was tempted to make up an excuse, claim illness or an emergency, but she wasn't a liar. She needed to be up-front and professional, even if she didn't feel very professional in that moment.

A little voice in her head reminded her that she hadn't been professional the evening before in her garden when her patient and neighbor visited, either. Their conversation had been too personal, and the hug... well, it had been both exactly what she needed and something she shouldn't have allowed. But for those few seconds, her head on Matthew's muscular shoulder had been... nice.

She pushed aside the thought of appealing Navy SEALs and dialed Frank's number.

"Smit," his gruff voice answered.

"Hi, Frank, it's Dr. James." They'd been on a first-name basis, but she needed the formality of doctor and patient for this. "I'm sorry for the short notice, but I'm calling to let you know that I'm no longer able to be your provider for rehabilitation services."

"Why's that?" he asked. "We've been working so well together."

“I’m not legally obligated to share my reasons,” she said. She was following Brendan’s advice, and she did have the law on her side. Doctors could refuse to treat as long as the patient wasn’t in a life-and-death situation.

“I’m sorry to hear it,” Frank said, but he sounded unfazed. That surprised her. The few times she’d had to drop patients before, they’d gotten angry or defensive. Some had even yelled at her.

“I apologize for the inconvenience. I wish you the best. When you find another therapist, I’ll be happy to forward your records. Thank you.” She hung up quickly, glad to have the deed done. With any luck, Frank would leave the area soon. There were other therapists in the area, but she was the only one in her specialization. If he wanted access to someone at her level of qualification, he’d have to move. And it had always been clear he wasn’t here permanently, anyway.

She went to her treatment area and set up for her next appointment, which just happened to be her sexy neighbor. Professional, she reminded herself, was the word of the day. Be professional.

“Good morning,” she said when her receptionist showed Matthew in. “Ready to work hard?”

“You know it,” he replied, and she couldn’t help noticing his easy, loose-hipped gait and the Navy T-shirt that showed off his pecs and deltoids as he came toward her. He made her feel small and feminine, which was not her usual thing. She was plenty strong for her size, and she’d worked hard to overcome the stereotype that women couldn’t work with military guys and veterans.

By being professional.

“How are you this morning?” he asked, studying her face.

“Fine.” She gave him an overly bright smile. “You?”

“I’m good. About last night, I didn’t mean to overstep or pry about the kid thing...”

“No worries,” she said, not wanting to go down the personal avenue again. “Let’s get started.”

She had an hour-long session planned for him, with some challenging exercises at the start. She sent him through a series that required downward pressure on his hand. That didn't do anything for fine motor skills, but a SEAL had to do push-ups and other types of calisthenics. Not that it looked like he'd gotten out of shape, but she didn't want him to compensate by taking too much weight on his left hand.

"Again," she said after he'd had a sixty-second breather.

"Damn, lady," he muttered, but he started the series again, executing it flawlessly despite the sweat that popped out on his forehead.

When it was done, he faced her. "What's next?"

His body language told her that anything she could dish out, he'd take. His slight smirk did, too. He got what she was up to. If she was proving a point, so was he. Maybe raw determination *would* get him back to almost normal. Almost.

"All right. Let's try this." Over the next forty minutes she put forth more challenges, called him out when he tried to compensate in unsafe ways, and pushed him like she'd never pushed a patient before—while taking care not to aggravate his injury, of course. Through it all, he didn't lose the confident, even cocky, attitude.

That wasn't usually her thing. She normally liked intellectual men, not that she'd dated much in Hartsville. Matthew was plenty intelligent, but in a different way. She had to admit that his physicality was attractive. It was raw and real, but she'd also seen how he'd cradled his niece in his arms the night before. That was real, too.

"Am I not doing this right?" he asked, and she realized she'd been watching him without speaking for too long. She felt busted but reminded herself he couldn't know her thoughts.

"You're good. We've run over, though." They were ten minutes past the end of their session, which meant they were into her lunch hour and her receptionist would already be gone. So they were alone.

“I’ll meet you out front if you want to change.” She needed a minute to herself and left him in the gym. He had a bag with him, and she figured he’d slip on a fresh shirt. She had no reason to see him shirtless from a professional standpoint, but curiosity...

She was imagining the sharp cut of muscles on his back as she walked to the reception area and came to an abrupt halt. Beth had left for lunch, but the room wasn’t empty. Frank Smit stood there. He was smiling, but something about the expression looked false. Her happy thoughts about Matthew disappeared in a flash, and her stomach churned.

Frank took a step toward her. “Hello, Dr. James,” he said. “I hope you don’t mind my stopping by like this.” Instinctively, she took a step back and hit the wall behind her. Boxed in, she lifted her chin.

“What can I do for you, Mr. Smit?” she asked, glad that her voice didn’t shake. Frank was burly—not tall, but he looked like he could pick up a car. He’d always been pleasant to her, with a gruff kind of charm. Now, given the coldness in his eyes, that charm seemed like a facade.

Now, she could see him as a bad guy.

“I want to know why you’re dropping me as a patient. We’ve been working well together. Making progress. I’m concerned that switching therapists now could set back my recovery. I’m sure you don’t want to be responsible for that.”

He wasn’t wrong. But her gut told her to stand by her decision. “As I said on the phone, I’m not obligated to give you an explanation. I’m sorry this is inconvenient for you, but if you find another therapist without delay, you shouldn’t suffer any negative consequences as a result.”

“I just don’t understand.” Frank’s body was like a wall, and his icy stare was unnerving. “Last session, everything was fine, and today, you’re bailing on me. I want to know what changed.”

“Just exercising my professional privilege,” she said. “Now, my office is closed for lunch. I need you to leave.”

“What’s going on here?” Matthew stepped out of the treatment area.

“None of your business,” Frank growled, shifting his attention from her to Matthew. She took the opportunity and moved quickly, slipping to the side to get out of reach.

“Dr. James?” Matthew had dropped his bag, and his entire body was alert.

“Mr. Smit was on his way out,” she said.

Silence hung for a moment before Frank backed down and retreated to the door. She half expected him to issue some kind of threat, but he left quietly.

“Are you okay?” Matthew asked as soon as the door closed. “What was that about?”

“I’m fine.” She went to the door and turned the deadbolt before sitting in one of the reception chairs. Her knees felt like rubber, but she didn’t plan to admit that to Matthew or anyone.

“Your receptionist should make sure the office is locked before going to lunch,” Matthew said. “You don’t want people walking in without you knowing it. And I didn’t like his attitude.”

“I let him go as a patient today. People don’t always take that well.”

“All the more reason to be cautious about your security.” He came to sit next to her. She should have known he would be perceptive. He had to be accustomed to evaluating threats. It was a world she wasn’t—and didn’t want to be—familiar with. “There probably isn’t much they can do, but you might want to report this to the police. At least get this on record in case he shows up here again.”

She sighed. “I’ve already done that. I mean, not about him coming here just now, obviously.” Should she tell Matthew what she’d overheard? It was none of his business, and there was no reason for him to know.

“Oh?” he asked. It wasn’t a demand, which she might have resisted. He sounded like a concerned friend. If he hadn’t been

here today, things might have gone far worse. A brief explanation wouldn't hurt.

"I've been doing house calls for Frank for his treatment. I can't talk about any of his private health details, of course. But I was at his house the day before yesterday. We finished our session, and I left, then realized that I'd left my phone inside. I knocked, but he must not have heard me. The door hadn't latched, and I peeked in and saw my phone on a table in the front room. So I slipped inside and got it."

How she regretted that moment. If she hadn't made the decision to enter his house, she wouldn't be in this bind. Then again, she'd still be working with a man who might be a violent criminal. She wasn't sure which was worse.

"And what happened then?"

"I overheard him on a phone call. He said some things that were... troubling."

"What things?"

She repeated what she'd heard Frank say about a gun and the mayor. "It frightened me. So I called a police detective I know, and he said he'd look into it. But he kind of implied that I'd probably misunderstood what I heard."

"Smit's attitude just now wasn't a misunderstanding," Matthew said. "He was either fishing for information or trying to intimidate you—or both. Does he have reason to suspect you overheard him?"

"I closed the door too loudly on my way out," she admitted. "It sticks, and you have to slam it. He might have heard that, or he could have seen me. He was in his kitchen, which looks out onto the driveway. It's possible. Probable, maybe." She was trying to stay calm about all this, but that was getting harder.

"Call the detective again. Tell him what happened just now," Matthew advised, and then his voice softened. "Kinley, I didn't like what I saw. Everything I know tells me that man is capable of violence."

It made her extra nervous that a SEAL would say that, but she didn't want to hit the panic button. "Thanks for your concern, but it'll be all right. Frank isn't from here. He'll leave town soon, and this will be over. Besides, Brendan did say he'd check into things. I'm sure he'll let me know if he finds anything."

She could tell Matthew didn't like that answer. He opened his mouth, but she wasn't going to argue with him about this. She'd made her decision, so she stood up and walked to the door, glad that her legs were steady again. She unlocked the deadbolt and held the door open for him.

To his credit, he took the hint. He was halfway out the door when he paused. "Promise me you'll be careful. Lock your doors, keep your phone handy, check in the back seat of your car. That kind of thing."

"I will." She kept her tone brisk. He did leave then, but only took a few steps outside. She turned the lock again and saw his slight nod of acknowledgment. His head was moving from side to side, apparently scanning the parking lot. Probably habit, but he seemed more vigilant than she'd noticed before.

As she walked back to the office fridge to get her salad, she had to admit that she liked his protectiveness. She didn't need it, but it was nice anyhow.

“Hold still, honey,” Matthew said for the sixth time. He had Anaya between his knees as he sat on a kitchen chair.

“Owwie, hurts.” She covered her head with her hands, trying to ward off his attempts to comb through her thick, unruly hair.

“Sorry, but I’ve got to do something with it.” How could a small girl’s hair reduce him to this? He’d solicited advice from Kenton’s wife, Mia, since her girls were nearly the same age as Anaya. She’d suggested braids were the best means of controlling Anaya’s curls. Mia had even done some fancy braid, a French braid she’d called it, that held for two days before the frizz took over again.

“No comb.” Anaya was near tears, and her pleas ripped at Matthew’s heart.

He knew how to do a simple braid, but when he did manage to untangle Anaya’s hair, the strands kept slipping through his right hand. Maybe he *should* go for the occupational therapy Kinley recommended. He’d had a session with her the day before, and other than responding briefly to his questions about Smit, she’d been all business. He was somewhat relieved that she hadn’t heard anything from the man, but that didn’t mean the problem was gone.

He’d kept an eye out on her behalf, but he’d like to see what kind of security system she had in her home. He’d learned quite a bit about those while helping his teammate Garrett install one when Harley, now Garrett’s girlfriend, was being stalked by her ex.

“Run and play for a minute while I figure something out.”

Anaya took off, and he could hear her chatter as she talked to Pansy and her other toys. She was a good kid, and so far he wasn't finding the terrible twos too terrible. It helped that she told on herself when she did something bad, chanting “No, no, no,” the whole time she was sneaking a cookie out of the jar or climbing up on the counters like she knew she wasn't supposed to. He'd laughed the first time she'd done that, but he'd learned to check on her promptly, too.

Mostly it was minor stuff like spilling her drink or flipping her room light back on after bedtime. Nothing to get worked up about, but he kept an ear out for her while he considered what a Google search had revealed the evening before. He'd done a simple search for “murder” and “mayor.” The hits had been instant.

The mayor of one of Chicago's bedroom communities had been killed by an assassin's bullet a few months earlier. The suspicion was that it was a Mafia hit. Matthew had been out of the country at the time and had missed the news coverage. According to the reports, it was believed that the assailant had been seriously injured during his escape. He'd jumped from a balcony, and some sources suggested that he'd been unable to walk afterward and had been carried away by an accomplice.

Kinley hadn't said anything about the injuries that had led Frank to be working with her, but a fall like that could certainly have given him injuries that would require physical therapy. One article claimed that the assailant's gun had misfired on the second shot, which might have caused a hand injury as well.

All of that pointed to the possibility that Frank Smit could be very bad news. Had Kinley unknowingly been helping a mob hit man recover?

It made Matthew's skin crawl to think about her going to Smit's home and being alone with him during the therapy sessions. Anything could have happened to her.

Anything still could.

He walked to his kitchen window, where he could see into Kinley's backyard. When she was out there, she was usually working, tending her flowers, but today was an exception. She was seated with a book in her hands, a can of soda on the nearby table. He hated to disturb her peace, but he did need help with Anaya's hair, and a visit would give him a chance to check out her security.

"Anaya," he called and waited to hear her little feet running toward him. The sound made him smile every time. "Do you want to visit fairyland again?"

She nodded her head vigorously. She had been talking constantly about the magic of Kinley's garden, so he'd known it wouldn't be a tough sell.

"I'm going to ask Kinley to help with your hair, okay?" That drew another nod, so he gathered up the comb, brush, and elastic bands from the table, and they headed toward the gate that connected the properties. He paused when he reached it.

"If I admit you were right about something, will you help a guy out?" he called.

Kinley looked toward him, her expression open. Much more than it had been in her office. "That depends. What was I right about?"

"Occupational therapy. I may need that after all, since I can't do anything with Anaya's hair."

"Come on over," she said.

He opened the gate, and Anaya ran straight to Kinley, who scooped her up with a huge smile. "Hi, princess."

"Hi." Anaya put her short arms around Kinley's neck for a few seconds before squirming to get down. She raced across the grass toward a flowerbed.

"Not so fast, missy. Hair first." Matthew hated being a party pooper, but he really did need help.

With a heavy sigh, Anaya returned to them and let Matthew position her in a chair. Matthew winced but also felt validated

when Anaya wailed as soon as Kinley touched her head with a comb or even with her fingers.

“Time for different tools. Be right back,” Kinley said and disappeared into her house. She returned with a spray bottle and squirted Anaya’s hair with sweet-smelling liquid. After that, she was able to glide the comb through the curls with barely a snuffle.

“What is that stuff, and where do I buy it?” Matthew asked.

Kinley laughed. “It’s called detangler, and any drugstore will have it. My hair gets a little wild at times, too.”

He had trouble imagining that. Her hair always looked so soft and lovely. “Putting it on my shopping list.”

Kinley worked for a few more minutes, chatting with Anaya about flowers, until all the snarls were gone. “Okay, we’re ready to braid. Do you know how?” she asked him.

“Divide the hair in three sections and crisscross them.”

“That’s the general principle. I think we’d better do two braids, though.” She took the comb and made a neat part down the center of Anaya’s head. “I’ll braid one side, and you do the other.”

“No, owwies,” Anaya insisted.

“We’ll do our best, but your uncle has to learn. Can you be a brave girl for a few minutes more?” Kinley asked. “I think I’ve got some cookies in my kitchen for afterward.” The promise of a cookie had Anaya sitting up straight with a stoic expression on her little face. Kinley turned back to Matthew. “First, section the hair. Hold two strands in your left hand and one in your right.”

He gritted his teeth, trying to get control of that single section of hair, but it kept slipping out of his grasp. To add to his frustration, he noted that Kinley quickly braided the hair on the other side of Anaya’s head and secured it with an elastic band.

“You’re doing fine,” she said, leaning closer to inspect his work. He wasn’t sure whether she was speaking to him or to

Anaya, who was starting to squirm, making his job tougher. He managed about three inches worth of braid and knew he was in trouble. “Do you want some help?”

Kinley’s face was only inches from his, and he was suddenly too aware of the edge of attraction between them. He’d done a pretty good job of ignoring it so far, but it threw him for a loop when he was already feeling off-balance. He was dissatisfied with his own inability to complete a simple task—a stark reminder of how far he was from accomplishing his goal of returning to his job. To get there, he was going to have to avoid distractions... and Kinley James was becoming one. He caught the scent of her light perfume again and knew he was in trouble.

“Yes. You’d better finish this,” he said, annoyed with himself and annoyed that she’d been right about his need for occupational therapy. He was going to have to relent on that one in order to take care of Anaya. “Thanks,” he forced himself to add.

“No problem.” Their fingers touched as she took control of the braid he’d started. Her eyes met his briefly before she looked down and quickly finished the braid.

“Cookie?” Anaya asked when Kinley snapped the elastic in place.

“Absolutely. Let’s go inside. I think I’ve got lemon shortbread and chocolate chip. Which do you like?” Anaya had already slipped her hand into Kinley’s.

“Both.”

“We’ll have to ask your uncle about that. I don’t want to spoil your dinner.”

Dinner, he thought, which would probably be pizza again. Yeah, he had a long way to go on a lot of things.

He followed them into the spacious house, listening to their easy chatter. Kinley really got what to say to a kid. He could take a few lessons from her on that. When they turned into the kitchen to get the promised cookie, he continued down the hall

that led from back door to front, keeping an eye out for any sign of a security system.

Nothing. No door or window alarms. No cameras. The only thing he found was what looked to be a first-generation doorbell monitor. He went out onto the front porch to trigger the camera, then checked the display. Not even a good angle. Someone could be standing a few feet on either side of the door and wouldn't be visible.

"Matthew, can Anaya have a second cookie, or would you... What are you doing?" Kinley was in the hall, staring at him. "Are you checking out my security system?"

"You need a better one," he said flatly. Was he overstepping his boundaries as a neighbor? Probably. But he didn't like the thought of her being vulnerable. It wasn't personal. He'd protect anyone who needed his help, he told himself.

"I'll keep that in mind and take care of it when I'm ready to."

Definitely overstepped. "I'm just... concerned. That's all."

"You should concern yourself with your rehabilitation," she said, her tone even.

Anaya came out of the kitchen. "Hungry. When's pizza?"

Matthew picked her up. "I haven't ordered it yet."

Anaya's brow creased in confusion. "It comes."

It wasn't surprising that she thought the pizza place just sent a pizza to his house every evening. That had to stop. He had to manage better meals.

"Eating a lot of delivery?" Kinley asked. "It's an easy habit to fall into."

He looked at her, but she didn't appear to be passing judgment on him. Her expression was sympathetic. "Too easy," he agreed. "It's just..." He lifted his right hand and slanted his eyes toward Anaya.

"Ah." Kinley smiled, and her eyes turned warmer. "Seems to me that cooking is a great opportunity for some occupational therapy. I think I've got the makings for spaghetti and

meatballs, if you want to join me. Forming the meatballs will work your fine motor skills nicely.”

“Can we stay?” Anaya framed his face with her small hands. He couldn’t resist her when she did that. And he wanted to stay, if for no other reason than knowing Kinley would be safe while he was there.

“Say ‘Thank you’ to Kinley for inviting us.”

Anaya turned to Kinley. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. It’s a treat for me, too. I eat alone most nights.” Kinley’s expression went wistful for a second, and he had to wonder why she didn’t have someone special in her life. He’d taken a quick peek into her living room and hadn’t noticed any pictures of her with anyone. Just photos of an older couple that he assumed were her parents.

“Come into the kitchen, and I’ll put you both to work.” She led the way as he reminded himself that her personal life was none of his business and his interest in her wasn’t something he should pursue. He already had too much on his plate.

Kinley gave Matthew a wave as he was parking and she was pulling out of her driveway. She paused in the street and rolled down her window, and he got out of his car and jogged over to her.

“I’m running to the grocery store to get what we need for dinner tonight.”

Their dinner the evening before had been surprisingly fun and, she thought, good for him. As she’d told him, forming the meatballs and slicing cucumbers for the salad offered opportunities for some occupational therapy. He’d gotten frustrated a few times at his lack of fine motor skills, biting back a couple of curse words, but he’d persevered.

Aside from the therapy benefits, it had been nice to have company. Matthew had an easy smile, and he was easy on the eyes, too. Not to mention he was a great conversationalist. Anaya was a doll with a hint of mischievousness. Absolutely precious. Kinley had enjoyed it all so much that she’d suggested they do it again today.

“You don’t have to have us over,” he said. “I can order a pizza.”

Was he trying to get out of their plans or just being polite? She decided on the second. “No pizza. Chicken with lemon sauce, rice, and asparagus as promised.”

“It does sound good. I think I’ve got a bottle of pinot grigio,” he offered.

“That will complement the meal nicely. I’ll be back before you know it,” she said.

“See you in a bit.” He smiled and stepped back as she put her car in gear and headed down the street.

She was still thinking of that smile when she approached the stop sign at the end of the block. Her foot moved to the brake, but there was no tension in the pedal. It went straight to the floor.

She gasped. What the heck?

She pumped the brake, but that did nothing. She was still moving forward.

A car was coming from her left on the cross street, and it didn’t have a stop sign. She had a second of panic, imagining the collision, before she yanked the wheel hard to the right. She went up on the curb and crashed into Mr. Dotson’s prized azalea bushes before coming to a stop. The other car blew its horn as it went past.

She took in a shaky breath and loosened her grip on the steering wheel. What had just happened? She was still trying to process it when her door was yanked open.

“Are you hurt?” Matthew stood there, Anaya cradled in one arm. He must have run down the street.

“No... no. I’m okay. Just shaken up.” The release of adrenaline that raced through her body made her legs tingle, but she knew it would pass in a minute.

“Shut your engine off,” he said, his voice firm but gentle.

“What? Oh.” She hadn’t even realized it was still running. She twisted the key. “Got it.” When she started to get out, he caught her arm.

“Take your time. Make sure your legs are steady.”

“I’m fine. Really.” She climbed out and assessed the damage, which didn’t appear to be much to her car. The bushes would need some TLC. She was going to owe Mr. Dotson a peach pie or two as repayment.

“What happened?” Matthew hovered close to her.

“The brakes failed. I pumped them, but nothing happened.” She heard a police siren. Someone must have called about the accident.

“Can you take Anaya while I look?”

“Sure.” She reached for the girl and moved a few paces away from the vehicle. Matthew got down on the ground and crawled half under her car, which couldn’t have been easy with his right hand not fully functional.

A police cruiser pulled up, followed by an unmarked car. She recognized Brendan in the second vehicle.

“What’s going on? You okay?” Brendan rushed toward her. “One of your neighbors called in that you were in an accident.”

“I’m good. The brakes failed. I...” She paused as Matthew got to his feet.

“The brake line is severed,” Matthew said as he dusted off his jeans. “Not a clean break, though.”

“You sure about that?” Brendan sized up the other man. “I’m Brendan Hogue, by the way. And you are?”

“This is Matthew Templeton. He’s a patient, and he happens to live next door to me. Brendan’s the detective I told you about,” she explained to Matthew.

“Right. Good to meet you,” Matthew said, eyeing the detective. “Which branch did you serve in?”

“Army. MP for eight years,” Brendan said. “You?”

“Navy SEAL. Active duty... mostly.”

“How did you two...?” She looked between the men. She’d known that Brendan served in the army, but how had Matthew? They both shrugged as if it were obvious.

“Show me the line,” Brendan said and squatted down to look where Matthew pointed. After a minute, they both stood again. “Could be intentional, but, like you said, it’s not a clean cut.”

“Might be intended to look accidental,” Matthew suggested.

“That would take some skill. It’s more likely just a maintenance issue.” Both men looked at Kinley.

“I wouldn’t take you for someone who lets stuff like that go,” Matthew said. He was right.

“The brakes were making noise a few weeks ago, so I had them checked. The mechanic said the noise was from the rotors, but that I should be good for another two or three thousand miles. He didn’t say anything about the brake line.”

“I’ll have your car towed to a garage where they can get it up on a lift for an inspection.” Brendan pulled his phone out and made a call.

“Wanna go home,” Anaya, who had been quiet until then, said.

“You should take her. I’ll wait for the tow truck.” She transferred Anaya back to her uncle’s arms. Kinley could tell he wanted to stay, but it was her car and her problem.

“Come to my house when you’re done.” He gave her a slight smile. “I’ll order pizza.”

Close to an hour later, she stepped onto Matthew’s front porch. The door opened before she could knock. “I’m not the pizza guy,” she said, assuming he’d been waiting for the delivery.

“He was here a few minutes ago.”

“Oh.” She wasn’t really surprised that Matthew had been watching for her. He was a protector at heart. She’d already seen that. His eyes went past her, and she had to wonder what he was looking for. But it must be habit. She’d noticed him doing the same thing before. He seemed to focus on the ground closest to them before widening out to a broader view.

“Come in.” He stepped back, allowing her to pass by him into the house before taking one last look at the street. “Anaya’s in the kitchen.” He pointed to the right. “I better get back in there.”

The little girl was in a booster seat with a cut-up slice of pizza in front of her. She looked up and smiled when she saw them come in. “Pizza!”

“Looks like you’re enjoying it,” Kinley said.

“Yummy.” The sauce on Anaya’s face indicated she’d been eating enthusiastically.

“Sit. I’ll get you a plate,” Matthew invited.

Kinley was happy to sink into a chair and even happier when he put a glass of wine in front of her. “Thanks. This wasn’t the evening I expected.” She took a sip of the wine. It was crisp and cold, just what she needed. “I’m sorry about dinner.”

“I’m sorry your car is out of commission, but I’m glad you weren’t hurt. That could have been a lot worse if you hadn’t turned sharply like you did. That was some good defensive driving.”

“I suppose you’ve got training in that.” She took a slice of pizza from the box.

“Yeah, but even so, it’s hard to remember in the heat of the moment.”

“My self-preservation instincts are pretty strong.”

“Good to know.” He wasn’t eating, she noticed. He seemed preoccupied, and she wondered if she should eat quickly and head home. Maybe he didn’t want her in his house.

“I don’t like thinking about what might have happened,” he said. “When did you have your car at the mechanic?”

“Exactly?”

“If you can.”

She pulled her phone out and opened the calendar to find the appointment reminder. “Ten days ago.”

“And how far have you driven since?”

“I haven’t bought gas since then, so not far. A hundred miles, maybe?”

“Done,” Anaya declared, slapping her hands down on the table. “I get down.”

Matthew wiped her face and hands with a wet paper towel before lifting her from her booster seat. “Do you want to finish

your movie?" he asked, making Anaya jump with excitement.

He and Anaya went into the next room, and Kinley heard the music from *Tangled* come on. Kinley liked the retelling of "Rapunzel" and wouldn't have minded watching with the girl, but she could see that Matthew had other things on his mind. He returned and slid into a chair across from her. His look was intense.

"I'm not going to sugarcoat this, Kinley. I think your brakes were tampered with, and Smit did it. And if he really is a professional criminal, he'd know how to make it seem like an accident."

She swallowed the wine she'd just sipped. She had to admit that she'd been thinking the same thing. "He knew that my brakes needed work."

"What?" Matthew leaned closer.

"In conversation during therapy, I mentioned that my brakes were making noise, and he told me to see my mechanic about them." At the time, it had just been something to talk about while Frank was doing his exercises, but everything seemed ominous now.

"He knows you overheard him on the phone, and he doesn't want to take any chances that you'll talk to someone. Kinley, you're in danger." Matthew's hand covered hers where it rested on the tabletop. "I want you to stick close to me until we can be confident he's left town."

She yanked her hand back and straightened her shoulders. "I can take care of myself." Wasn't that what she'd been doing since moving to Hartsville? At the beginning, she'd had Darren... but that hadn't lasted. She was grateful, though, that she'd followed her then-boyfriend to this small town. It had become home to her, and she planned to stay—even though Darren was long since gone, returned to Atlanta with another woman. They were now married and had a baby on the way, according to his Facebook. She rubbed at the familiar ache near her heart.

It wasn't for Darren. Not anymore. It was for the child she wanted.

"I'm fine. Seriously," she added when Matthew's eyebrows rose. "Besides, it may turn out to have been an accident and nothing to do with Frank. I'm not going to overreact."

"It's better than underreacting. Until you know there's no threat, you have to assume there is one."

That sounded like SEAL logic. "I don't function that way," she said. "I assess and decide on the best course of action. Just like when I plan someone's therapy."

"No one doubts your credentials there. You're the expert when it comes to physical therapy. But now we're talking about my area of expertise. Let me handle this for you."

She shouldn't. It wasn't good to rely on others, but he had a point. He knew way more about security than she did. And... part of her wanted to trust him to take care of her. Warmth spread through her at the idea, even as her brain told her that she was being silly.

"Come on. Please." He gave her a cocky smirk that should have annoyed her. She was charmed by it instead. Charmed enough that she slowly nodded her agreement.

This time she covered his hand with hers. She'd touched him often during therapy, but at this contact, a zing went up her arm that had nothing to do with physical rehabilitation. He rolled his hand over so their palms touched, sending another jolt through her.

His eyes were on her face. The smirk had become a slow, sexy smile.

She should slide her hand from his. She knew that, but it still took her a moment to do it. Once she did, she missed the contact.

"Movie over." Anaya stood in the doorway to the kitchen.

"Time for bed, honey." He stood and scooped up his niece. "Don't go anywhere, Kinley. I want to talk about your security system and the upgrades I'm going to install this weekend."

He was out of the room before she could reply, so she reached for the bottle of wine and topped off her glass. She'd put herself in his hands, which seemed fair to her in a way. He'd done the same with her. Just in a different capacity.

All she could think about as she sipped her wine was how she'd like to put her hands on him.

“No!” Anaya squealed and covered her eyes. “Owwie.”

“I’m sorry, honey. You’ve got to stay still.” He was losing the battle of the hair again, despite the detangler and the techniques Kinley had shown him. He sat on the edge of the bathtub and tried to pin Anaya between his legs.

“Eyes.” She rubbed them.

“Did the spray get in your eyes?” When Anaya just sobbed, he assumed it had. He held in a curse at his own ineptitude and reached for a wet washcloth. The detangler was supposed to be safe for eyes, but maybe it wasn’t gentle enough for an overwrought toddler. “Let me rinse them out,” he coaxed. “Water will make them feel better.” He pulled her onto his lap and pressed the washcloth to her eyes. Her sobbing quieted after a moment, and she curled into him.

God. He sucked at being a parent.

He’d been doing okay in general, keeping his head above water. But, damn, the entire day had been one giant setback. Anaya had been up at the crack of dawn, which would have been fine if he hadn’t stayed up late the night before.

Totally his own fault. The Sunday *New York Times* crossword was a weekly ritual that he wasn’t willing to give up. But between improving Kinley’s security system and keeping track of an active two-year-old, he hadn’t gotten around to starting it until late. And then he had to finish.

Still, he'd have been able to handle the lack of sleep if anything else had gone right. It hadn't. Anaya had refused to eat the cereal that she'd been gleeful about for the past week. She'd knocked her juice cup down from the table and the lid had fallen off, spraying sticky liquid everywhere.

Again, his fault. Getting it tightened was tough with his lack of motor control. While he was mopping up orange juice, Anaya had had a bathroom emergency that ended up in a potty-training fail. He'd had to put her in the tub while he used towels to soak up the pee on the bathroom floor. How did one little girl have so much in her?

He'd scrubbed Anaya, dried her tears about soiling her favorite princess underpants, and done two loads of laundry. Now he was engaged in the battle of the hair. His SEAL training told him he needed to retreat and regroup. But parents didn't have that luxury. The little girl in his arms needed his care, and he was the only one who could give it.

Parenthood was tough. Single parenthood felt impossible.

Even as he thought that, he made soothing sounds and rubbed Anaya's back to calm her. He just didn't know how long he could keep this up. Would this be his life from now on? How the hell was he going to manage? It was so unpredictable.

His behavior during his teen years proved that he needed organization imposed on him, which was why the military suited him so well. It provided order and structure, and he lived within that system. SEAL missions didn't always run smoothly, but he had a team and extensive training to fall back on so he always knew what to do.

When it came to parenting, he was totally at sea. All the advice from his friends, the internet, and books hadn't prepared him for the kind of day he'd had so far with Anaya.

And he was only dealing with the immediate problems. The long-range ones still loomed. Who would take care of Anaya when he went out on a mission? He needed a nanny, but he hadn't begun the process of finding one.

Anaya's breathing had evened out, he realized. She'd fallen asleep. He should go put her in her bed to nap, but he kept holding her instead. Her warm body snuggled up to his was comforting, even though it came with so many damn complications, and at a time when his life was already a mess.

He held up his right hand and tried to curl it into a tight fist. No matter how hard he concentrated, he couldn't do it. He'd made progress in the past weeks with Kinley's therapy, but he still lacked strength and control. Working his fingers independently was a challenge, too. They just wouldn't do what his brain asked them to.

He let out a long, frustrated sigh. There were too many problems in his life that didn't have easy solutions. Anaya, his hand, his career.

He wasn't into self-pity. It was unproductive. But he was close to wallowing in it when he heard a knock on his front door. Now what?

He stood, shifting Anaya in his arms, and went to answer it.

"Hi," Kinley said when he swung the door open. Her eyes took them in: him and the sleeping child. Her tone dropped. "Is she sick?"

"No, she's just having a rough day... which means we both are." After their many conversations during therapy sessions, plus the times they'd met outside the office, he was okay admitting that to her.

"Oh. Does that mean you're not making it to our therapy session?"

"Shit," he muttered. "What time is it?"

"Almost one. I came home for lunch and wondered when I saw your truck still here."

He was usually gone by then, so he had time to drop Anaya off at day care before his appointment. "I completely forgot about it. I guess I'll have to cancel. Day care isn't going to work today. Hell, we haven't even had lunch."

"That bad, huh?"

“I don’t have a lot of experience yet, but I can honestly say it’s the worst day we’ve had so far.” He was ready to throw in the towel. Go to bed and hope tomorrow would be better.

“Can I make a suggestion?” She stepped inside and quietly closed the door behind her.

“Yeah. Anything.” SEALS didn’t do “desperate”—they had to be able to make it through every imaginable situation, literally under fire, while keeping their heads clear. But he was getting close.

“Let’s go for a change of location. It’ll do Anaya good, and it’ll work for your therapy, too.”

That sounded tempting. “What do you have in mind?”

“We’ll go out to Lake Hart Park. It’s one of my favorite places, and it has playground equipment that you and Anaya can both use. I’m going to make you swing from the monkey bars.” She grinned at him.

“Don’t you have other appointments?” She usually had them stacked up until five.

“My schedule was blocked off because I was supposed to be attending a webinar this afternoon, but it got canceled,” she said. “We can pick up some sandwiches for you and Anaya and spend the afternoon together.”

It wasn’t a bad idea. It would make Anaya happy and keep him from having to skip therapy. Getting more time with Kinley was a bonus. He could frame that as protecting her, like he’d done over the weekend, but the truth was that he liked being with her.

Anaya stirred against him, waking up. “Kinley,” she said when she saw their visitor. “You play with me.” Anaya stretched out her arms.

Kinley took her and looked at Matthew, waiting for his decision.

“Let’s do it,” he said, seeing no reason to resist. “Do you want to go to the park with me and Kinley?” he asked Anaya.

“Yes! Park!”

“Give me five minutes to pack a bag.” He’d learned that was a necessity when going anywhere with a kid.

A little while later, Anaya was clapping her hands and counting off how long he could hang from the monkey bars. Moving across the rungs hadn’t been bad, since it was quick and he didn’t need a tight grip. Hanging in place was different. It required strength his hand hadn’t regained.

“Five, six, eight, nine, seven,” Anaya yelled. Her grasp of number sequences wasn’t much, but she made up for it in enthusiasm. Kinley probably had a more accurate count, but she wasn’t correcting Anaya.

“I’m going to make you take your left hand off entirely. No compensating.” She had no problem correcting *him*.

“You’re tough,” he grumbled.

“Don’t I know it. Drop the left.”

He did as she said and only lasted a few more seconds before his grip slipped entirely and he dropped onto his knees. He shook out his right hand, then opened and closed it.

“How’s it feel?” she asked.

“Not awful. It just won’t do what I want it to.”

“Slide?” Anaya danced in the direction of the ladder.

“Okay, but be careful at the top.” It was a short slide with only three small steps.

“Let me see.” Kinley was next to him, holding out her hands to take his injured one. When he gave it to her, she started pushing on various places. “Pain here? Or here?”

“No.” He ignored the twinge he felt.

“Would you tell me if there was?” She had her game face on, the one he saw during therapy. And he had to admit he liked watching her, liked knowing her different moods and expressions. What did that mean?

“Maybe.” His eyes went to Anaya as she came down the slide and ran back for a second go.

“Stubborn man.” Kinley dropped his hand, and he immediately missed the warmth of her touch.

“What next?” he asked, to prevent himself from reaching for her. He wanted to clasp his hand around hers in a way that had nothing to do with therapy.

“Sand.” She nodded to the small beach area on the edge of the lake. “Do you think Anaya will build a sandcastle with us?”

She’d probably love it. “Don’t we need tools for that?”

“There’s more than one way to do this, but sand rakes and shovels would be good. I wonder if we can—”

They were interrupted by a squeal so loud that Matthew couldn’t decide whether to cover his ears or prepare for an attack. He scanned the area and saw the cause of the excitement.

“Can we join you?” Mia called as she walked toward them with Ava and Emma on either side of her. Anaya took off running toward her playmates. Within seconds, they were all talking in high-pitched voices.

“I think you have to,” Matthew said. “It’s good to see you, Mia.” He gave her a hug.

“You’ve been a stranger, so I’m glad to happen onto you. Who’s your friend?” Mia asked. He didn’t miss the assessing look she shot between him and Kinley.

“This is Kinley James, the physical therapist I’m working with.” It was good for him to remind himself, too. “We brought our session outside today.”

“What a great idea,” Mia said. “It’s good to meet you, Kinley. I’m Mia Fitzpatrick, and those are my girls—Ava and Emma.”

“Mia’s husband is also a SEAL,” Matthew told Kinley.

“He’s on base at the moment,” Mia said with a sigh. “He got called in last week. Whatever is going on, I hope it’s short-term.”

“It must be tough when he’s gone for long periods,” Kinley commented.

“Can be, but it’s who he is.” Mia smiled. “I’d suggest the girls play together, but it looks like they already are.” The three of them were holding hands and dancing around in a circle. “I can keep track of them while the two of you focus on your therapy.”

“I’d appreciate that,” Kinley said. “Do you happen to have any sand toys with you?”

“Of course.” Mia opened the large bag she carried over her shoulder. “I’ve got a little of everything in here, including some treats from the bakery, but we’ll save those for later. Here we go.” She brought out a large baggie full of plastic tools and handed it to Kinley.

“That’s perfect. Thanks.” Kinley turned to Matthew. “Are you okay with leaving Anaya for a bit?”

“She’s in good hands. Thanks, Mia.”

“No worries.” Mia walked to a nearby bench and put her bag down before joining the girls.

“The beach, sailor,” Kinley commanded. They walked to the sandy area and dropped to their knees. “Let’s see what we’ve got in here.” She dug through the baggie and found a small rake, which she handed to him. “Make even rows using your right hand only. Keep them at the same depth.” He had to concentrate to grip the narrow handle and perform the task.

“How’d I do?” he asked when he’d made several passes with the rake.

“Not bad. Time for the next exercise. This damp sand will be perfect.” She showed him what she wanted him to do and sat back on her heels to watch. “Keep squeezing and packing. That’s it. Clay works for this, too. The whole idea is to form the shapes, which takes control and some strength.” He worked for several minutes and felt successful, though it was a sign of how his expectations had shifted that making a simple sandcastle counted as a win. He looked up to see approval on Kinley’s face. Approval and something else. Her cheeks turned pink, and she turned her gaze toward the sparkling water. He wanted to ask what she’d been thinking. Before he

could, she spoke again. “Maybe you can get some Play-Doh for Anaya and do this together at home.”

“She’d like that.” He glanced up to where the kids were sitting at Mia’s feet, eating cookies. “We should probably give Mia a break. Do you have any therapy that we can do with three little girls?”

“As a matter of fact, I was saving the most challenging exercise for last. And it happens to be kid friendly.” Kinley was smiling. “Are you up for it?”

“Guess so.” He couldn’t contain his grin, since her expression was infectious, but what did she have in mind? “I’m almost afraid to ask.”

“Come with me.” She rose and waited for him to stand. He wanted to put his hand on the small of her back as they walked. It seemed like the most natural thing in the world to have that contact with her. He managed to keep his hands to himself, but he saw Mia’s watchful eye on them. She saw the attraction between them, he was sure. It felt obvious. It felt good, too.

“Girls,” Kinley called as they got closer, “do you want to make daisy chains?” They dashed toward her, smiling. “We’ll need to pick some flowers first. Dandelions or daisies will work, but you need to keep the stems on them.” She showed the kids what she meant and sent them off to pick ten each. “You need ten flowers, too,” she told Matthew.

“If you say so.” He felt a bit uncomfortable playing with flowers, but he did a lot of things to entertain Anaya that he wouldn’t do on his own. This wasn’t all that different, he supposed. He selected his flowers and returned to where the girls were sitting in a circle around Kinley. He was glad Anaya had a pleasant, safe place where she could play like this. It was a far cry from the neighborhood where he’d grown up. The closest they’d had to parks were abandoned lots, and those weren’t places little kids should hang out.

“Okay, everybody, watch what I do, and then you do it.” Kinley demonstrated the steps several times, slowly. Matthew did his best to follow along and slit the stems with his

finger nail before threading the flowers together, but it was tough work. He felt sweat on his forehead, and it wasn't due to the summer sun.

Kinley helped the girls, intercepting and lending a hand right before they got frustrated, but she left him to struggle on his own. Pretty soon the girls had chains long enough to make crowns for themselves, but his was a mere six flowers long.

"Not much of a crown," he commented when Kinley finally turned her attention to him.

"It's not the end product that matters. It's the effort, and I'd say you did pretty well. This activity takes dexterity and fine motor control. Two weeks ago, you wouldn't have been able to do it at all."

She wasn't wrong about that. "So I can beat the odds?"

"You can improve so your day-to-day living is uninhibited. That's the most important thing."

Getting back to being a SEAL was important, too, but he didn't have time to say that before Mia walked up to them.

"Hey, I've got an idea," she said. "Why don't I take all the kids back to my house so you two can continue your session or whatever you'd like to do. You can pick Anaya up later."

He appreciated Mia's kindness, though he could tell she was trying to set him and Kinley up. He could politely refuse her offer, but one glance at Kinley had him thinking that some time alone with her wouldn't be a bad thing. He didn't get serious about women, so pursuing an attraction that was more than merely physical was out of the norm for him, but the whole unstructured day had been unlike him.

Kinley had kept him on course with his therapy, but what would happen when they had some genuine free time? He wanted to find out.

"I can even give her a bath and find a pair of PJs that'll fit her," Mia added.

He could do with a break from parental duties for one evening. "What do you say, Doc?"

“It’s your call,” Kinley said, but her smile was so sweet that the decision was easy.

“Thanks, Mia. I’ll pick her up around eight?”

“That’ll be perfect.”

He walked with Mia to her car and transferred Anaya’s car seat over. When he returned, he found Kinley on a bench with a pastry box on her lap.

“What’s that?”

“Mia left it for us. She’s sly. I like her.”

“I think she liked you, too,” he said as he sat next to her. “Did you peek?”

“Waited for you. It smells good, though.”

“Mia works at Hamman’s Bakery. I’m sure it’s delicious.” He opened the box. Two creme-filled pastries were inside. “Join me?” He held one out to her.

“Heavenly,” Kinley whispered after taking her first bite. “That’s amazing. I think I need to be friends with Mia.”

“My guess is you already are,” he said. Mia hadn’t been subtle in the few minutes it took to strap the kids into her car. She’d said how much she liked Kinley, giving him a pointed look.

Even if Mia had planned it, she couldn’t have left him and Kinley in a more romantic setting. The bench they were on had a lake view, and the late-day sun shed a glow over the nearby trees and flowers. It was an idyllic ending to a day that had started off in chaos, and he had no complaints—but he also needed to be honest with Kinley.

“My life is a mess right now,” he said.

“Whose isn’t?” she asked, licking creamy filling from her fingers. He couldn’t help but follow the movements of her lips and tongue. “I may or may not be being stalked by a violent criminal. How’s that for a mess?”

“Point taken. It’s just…” He wasn’t sure how to put his frustration into words.

“You like to work in definites. I get it—that’s my norm, too.” She angled toward him. “If it helps, your hand is improving faster than I would have anticipated. I’m still not saying that you’ll be able to go back to what you were doing before, so don’t get too excited. You’re making a lot of progress, though, and that matters.”

“Good to hear.” He should be pleased, but his mind was drifting to other things.

He moved the now-empty pastry box from between them and scooted closer to her. She raised her eyebrows but gave him a smile. He was about to go outside his safe zone. Way outside. He put his arm across the back of the bench and touched her shoulder before cupping her neck and drawing her closer.

She leaned into him, resting one hand on his leg. The simple contact had his blood sprinting through his veins. Her face was inches from his, her lips slightly parted. His last thought before their mouths met was that he could still back away—but why would he?

He started slow. Then, when she made a sexy sound in her throat, he deepened the kiss. Her response was immediate, her tongue sliding against his. *So good.* He pulled her closer until she was almost on his lap and her arms were around his neck. He moved his mouth from hers to kiss along her jawline.

He was about to nibble on her ear when her phone rang.

“Shoot,” she muttered. “I should...” She untangled herself from him and pulled her phone from her pocket. “Hello? Oh, hi, Brendan.” She listened for a minute, but Matthew could tell from her expression what the conversation was about. “Thanks for letting me know.” Another pause. “Yeah, I’ll be careful.”

“What did he say?” Matthew asked as soon as she hung up. He had to assume the detective had been calling about her accident.

“The mechanic inspected the brakes and can’t say conclusively whether the line was severed or not. Like you said, it wasn’t a clean cut, which would have been a giveaway.”

“Kinley, I have to think—” he started, but she held up a hand to stop him.

“There’s no proof, and that’s what matters to the police.” She stood, picked up the cake box, and walked the few feet to a trash can.

“I don’t want you hurt.” He went to her, resting his hands on her shoulders. “That’s what matters to *me*. I’m going to stay vigilant, and I need you to as well.”

“I will.” She looked away, but he touched her cheek, bringing her face back to his and placing another soft kiss on her lips.

Kinley swung open the door of the metal storage shed in her backyard and sighed. It was packed to the rafters. Literally. She took a step inside. She'd promised herself that she'd reorganize the contents as soon as she had some free time.

She could have done it the day before, since she'd ended up with the afternoon off, but then there'd been Matthew, Anaya, and the trip to the park. Meeting his friend and her little girls. And to top the day off, a very memorable kiss. She felt warm all over just remembering those moments in his arms. She hadn't felt like that in so long. Maybe never. Being with Matthew made her feel safe.

It shouldn't have happened, of course. He was her patient. Ethics required that she not get personally involved with him, but ethics had never sat on a sunny bench looking out over the lake with Matthew Templeton. That was for damn sure.

Okay. She needed to stop, because this train of thought was going to lead to more procrastination. She could hear Matthew in his yard, playing with Anaya. From the sound of it, they were tossing a ball. Joining them would be way more fun than dealing with this, because it wasn't just a shed in need of reorganization. It was a catalog of her hopes that had gone nowhere.

She moved aside a baby swing, still in its box, to go deeper into the shed. She should give some items away and establish a logical organization for the items that would stay in storage.

After considering that for a moment, she decided infant items—which tended to be lighter—would go in the loft, while toddler and bigger-kid stuff would stay below. She shifted a few things around, trying to create enough space to make some more strategic moves.

“Kinley,” Matthew called, and she returned to the shed’s door so she could hear him more easily. “Anaya wants to show you her—”

A sudden creak sounded, and the loft area crashed down. Kinley ducked as part of the roof caved in. More bangs followed as other roof trusses gave way. She darted out of the shed, her eyes wide. What was happening?

The thud of footsteps behind her made her whirl around, and Matthew yanked her farther from the collapsing structure. His hands went all over her, checking her for injuries.

“I’m not hurt.” She caught his hands and held them, needing that moment of contact. “I’m okay.” She turned to look at the shed that was now nothing more than a pile of twisted metal. “I don’t believe this. How could it fall down?”

“Shoddy construction?”

“It was a kit. I put it together myself. I thought I did it right.” She’d followed the instructions to the letter, and it had seemed sturdy. She’d been proud of herself for managing the assembly on her own. Maybe she’d stuffed too much into it and pushed against the bracing? In any case, she was glad he had called to her when he did, since she’d been standing under the loft area seconds earlier. It could have come down on her head.

“I’ll help you clean it up,” he said as Anaya toddled up to them, her pink pony clutched to her chest.

“You don’t have to.” Kinley dropped his hands and faced the mess. Her day had just gotten much more complicated.

“I don’t have any other plans.” He was already moving closer to survey the damage.

She smiled. “Besides caring for your niece and healing. Nothing at all.”

“I can always help a neighbor.” He shot her a grin that had her thinking about their kiss, which had been beyond neighborly. They weren’t repeating that, she told herself sternly. But she could do with his assistance.

They worked together to remove the remains of the roof and start a debris pile. As the boxes and totes were exposed, she realized that she should have refused his aid. The shed’s contents revealed too much about her. When he moved a crib mattress still sealed in plastic to the side, she felt his eyes on her and knew she had to say something.

“You’re wondering why your childless neighbor has such a stockpile of baby and kid stuff.” Her cheeks heated.

“I’m sure you’ve got a reason,” he commented neutrally.

“I do, or did.” She sat down on the sturdy box of a car seat and blew out a breath. “I think I mentioned that I’ve been trying to adopt a child.”

“You did.” His eyes were on Anaya, who was looking over some toys they’d put to one side. He couldn’t even meet her gaze. God, what was he thinking?

“It’s just... I want a child so much, and I thought if I proved to the adoption agency and the mothers who are giving up their babies that I was prepared, it would make a difference. I mean, look at all this.”

“Kinley,” he said, but she didn’t stop.

“I could set up a nursery by the end of the day. I’ve even got clothing, from preemie sizes to eighteen months. There’s a package of diapers over there. I’d need formula—I couldn’t stockpile that, since it expires—but everything else is here.”

“Kinley,” he repeated, dropping down in front of her.

“I’ve done all the research. I’ve bought the safest products, the most educational toys. I even have a stash of kid-friendly arts and crafts kits for rainy days.” She wiped a tear away. “I love those. I’m always buying them. Pom-pom makers, paint by numbers, learn to knit.” She finally stopped when he put his hand on her shoulder. “I just want a baby. Is that too much to ask?”

“No,” he said.

“Seems to be. I really thought I had a chance at a baby about six months ago, so I invited the mother over to see my collection. She couldn’t leave fast enough and dropped me from her list the next day. My contact at the adoption agency said I seemed too desperate. Well, dammit, I *am* desperate.”

“Have you considered having a baby through artificial insemination?” Matthew suggested, his voice low and soothing. “That’s what my sister did to get Anaya. She selected the father from a sperm donor catalog. It worked out well for her.”

Kinley shook her head. “I can’t have children. I’ve known that since I was a teenager.” Her periods had been so abnormal that her parents sent her for tests. It had been embarrassing and awful for a fifteen-year-old, but it revealed a chromosomal defect that would make having a baby a literal miracle.

“I’m sorry.” His hands rested on her knees, giving comfort.

“So adoption is what I’m left with.” She was fine with that—she was eager to open her heart and her home to give some unknown child the best life imaginable. That route wasn’t for everyone, though. When she and Darren got engaged, he’d said he was fine with it. But the truth came out before the wedding: he wanted a “real” child of his own. And he’d have one soon. Kinley tried not to be bitter about that, but at moments like this it was hard.

“What can I do?” Matthew asked softly.

She gave herself a shake and stood up. “Help me decide what to keep and what I should donate. If Anaya wants something, she can have it.” The little girl was digging through a bin of toddler toys that Kinley had ordered from an educational company. They were supposed to stimulate learning and growth, but Anaya was merely glancing at them and tossing them aside. “She doesn’t want them, does she?” It was all a waste. All her research and planning had been meaningless.

“Don’t let that get to you,” Matthew said. “I’m not an experienced parent, but in the past month, Anaya has loved

and then hated four different kinds of breakfast cereal. Purple was her favorite color one day, pink the next, then yellow. It was all about ‘Cinderella’ one week before she moved on to ‘Rapunzel.’ She’s declared chicken nuggets, hot dogs, pizza, ice cream, and about ten other foods to be the very best in the world. Nothing lasts at this age. Kids are fickle. You can’t take it personally.”

“I know that. I’m a rational person. A professional. I’ve got a doctorate, for god’s sake.” She was struggling for composure and losing. At the same time, it felt good to talk to someone about it. Her parents thought she should move back to Atlanta and focus on her career. They claimed not to want grandchildren. Her college friends all seemed to be having babies. No one got it, and Matthew probably didn’t either, but at least he’d listened.

More tears came, and she tried to battle them back. Crying wasn’t going to help. She’d done everything she could, and she was still waiting for the adoption agency to get back to her. She was frustrated with the phone tag they’d been playing for the past week. She needed advice on how to strengthen her profile with them. Or maybe there wasn’t anything she could do. The sense of hopelessness she’d been fighting for months threatened to swamp her again.

The next thing she knew, Matthew’s arms were around her, pulling her into a tight hug. She reached around his waist and held on. No one could fix this, but having him with her soothed some of her heartache.

“You’ll be the most amazing mom one day,” he whispered into her hair. “I’ve seen how you are with Anaya. You know what to say to her, how to calm her, and what will make her happy. You’ve helped me manage her more than you know, and it hasn’t just been combing her hair.”

She gave a shaky laugh and loosened her hold on him, but he kept her in his embrace. “You do need to get better at that.”

“I will. I’ve got this therapist who keeps on me about occupational therapy,” he said. “I’ll learn, so Anaya’s not embarrassed to go to preschool next year. I don’t want the

other girls talking trash about her sloppy braids and wild curls.”

“I like her wild curls,” Kinley said. Anaya’s hair was half up and half down at the moment, with curls springing everywhere. They floated out behind her as she ran around Kinley’s yard sniffing flowers.

“Me, too.” Matthew smiled as he watched his niece. He was an appealing guy. Sexy and sweet. But the way he was around Anaya captured Kinley’s heart in an entirely different way.

She rose on her tiptoes and kissed his cheek before making herself step away from him. “We’d better get at this. Anything I’m going to keep can go in my basement or spare bedroom.” The task didn’t seem so daunting with him at her side.

Kinley narrowed her eyes at the chart in front of her, glanced at Matthew, then turned back to the paperwork. He knew what was coming. He'd had enough therapy sessions with her to know that meant she was dreaming up a new way for him to work his hand.

"What now, Doc?" he asked, expecting a million reps of something seriously challenging. He could handle it. Whatever she doled out couldn't compare with the intensive training he'd endured to become a SEAL. Bring it on.

"Just thinking."

"Of a new form of torture," he teased.

She clicked her tongue and gave him a mock glare. He was glad to see she'd recovered from what had spilled out of her in her backyard the day before. He'd wanted to make it all better. Hell, he was still trying to come up with a way to help her have what she wanted.

"My therapy methods are not torture. Besides, aren't you supposed to be able to withstand that?"

"That's the goal." His training didn't include resisting a pretty, dark-haired therapist with eyes that showed her heart.

"I do have some ideas, but I don't want to have you overdo, so they'll have to wait."

"Do you want to walk home with me?" he asked.

“That would be nice. The weather couldn’t be more perfect,” she said. “I’ll be just a minute closing up.”

“I’ll be out front.” He went to the waiting area and looked out the door, checking to make sure nothing seemed out of place in the parking lot. He wanted to walk Kinley home because he enjoyed spending time with her, but it was also a way of making sure she was safe. He hadn’t forgotten about Frank Smit and his threats, and he still believed that her brake line had been cut.

“I’m ready.” Kinley came into the room, smiling, a bag over her shoulder. It was all he could do not to pull her close and kiss her. He hadn’t been able to get their kiss in the park out of his head. He wanted a repeat, but he was waiting for the right time. Yesterday, when she was distraught about the adoption thing, hadn’t been it.

A beautiful June evening might be. He’d see where the next few hours took them.

“We need to stop off and get Anaya from day care. It’s on the way.”

“No problem.” They chatted easily as they walked, and when they arrived at the day care center, Kinley smiled again. “Did you know this is the best place in town? I have my name on the infant waiting list here.” When he gave her a confused look, she continued, “I know that must sound like more of my overplanning, but infant day care is especially challenging to arrange. I want my ducks in a row.”

“So you’re not going about this without a clue like I am?” He grinned.

“Your circumstances were unique. Anyone would sympathize with that.”

People had been incredibly kind to him. “I got lucky that they had an opening for the summer. Be back in a minute.” He left her at the front door and returned promptly with Anaya.

“Kinley,” the girl cried and ran to her, throwing her arms around Kinley’s legs. “Up, up.”

“Let me carry you,” Matthew said.

“I can.” Kinley boosted the girl up and settled her on her hip. For the first few minutes, Anaya chatted away about her day, her friends, and how Pansy, the pink pony, liked the day care center. Fortunately, Pansy was happy, which told Matthew that his niece was, too. Once again, he felt his luck.

“Check out her braid,” he said when he could get a word in. “It held up all day.”

“Impressive,” Kinley said. “Before you know it, you’ll be doing updos.”

“I have no idea what that is, and I don’t want to learn.”

“You will.” Kinley shot him a smile. “This little gal will need updos for homecoming dances and prom and her wedding.”

“God help me,” he muttered.

They reached Kinley’s house and turned in together. He was glad to see that she was using the security system he’d installed on the door. She needed a lot more before her house would be truly secure, but that was as much as he’d been able to talk her into so far. He followed her through into the backyard, where they’d left the gate between their properties open. Kinley’s lighthearted mood disappeared when she saw the remains of her shed. She slowly lowered Anaya to her feet, and the girl took off, chasing a butterfly.

“What is it?” Matthew asked.

“I just remembered something: I told Frank that I planned to clean out my shed soon. I’d said it was stuffed and I needed to sort through it. It was the same day I overheard that conversation of his. Could he have been behind this?” Kinley pointed to the pile of rubble. “Is that too far-fetched?”

“Not necessarily.” Matthew kicked himself for not having considered it before. He was convinced that Frank had caused Kinley’s car crash, but he’d seen the shed as just a scary accident. “Let me take a closer look.”

“Should I call Brendan?”

“Couldn’t hurt.” Matthew liked the detective, though he wished Brendan would be a bit more proactive when it came

to Kinley's safety. He was cautious and didn't jump to conclusions, which was good, but sometimes a wait-and-see approach could backfire.

Matthew waited for Brendan to arrive. Then they went through the remains of the shed together.

"I'm not seeing anything suspicious," Brendan said. "You?"

"No, but... this looks odd to me." Matthew had noticed a spot on the back side of shed where the foundation seemed like it had been dug out.

Brendan came closer to inspect it. "Weird. Not criminal."

"Wish I'd thought to be more careful as we were clearing it up. I might have seen where a support was compromised or screws were removed."

"It's possible, but without evidence there's nothing I can do." Brendan turned to Kinley, who had been blowing bubbles with Anaya. "What made you think there was a connection?"

"Just a conversation I had with Frank. The two things I shared with him about my personal life—my brakes and the shed—have both turned into 'accidents' for me."

"Can you think of anything else you might have talked about in casual conversation? Trips you were planning? Places you like to hike? That sort of thing."

"Not that I can remember. We were usually pretty focused on his therapy. I'm starting to get nervous, though, Brendan."

Matthew had moved past nervous about her safety. "Will you let me install the window alarms for you now?" The kit she'd purchased had included sensors for the windows as well as the doors, but she'd thought doing the windows was overkill.

"It would be a good idea," Brendan told her. "Legally, there's nothing I can do at this point—we have no proof either of these incidents was anything but bad luck—but you should try to protect yourself in any way you can."

"I guess adding more security would be okay. I hate the idea of having to resort to that, but I'm getting creeped out. What if it's all in my head, though?"

Matthew doubted that. She was too logical.

“There’s no downside to taking sensible precautions,” he declared. He was next door and could get to her quickly, but only if he knew she needed help. She should have another layer of protection.

“What about at your office?” Brendan asked.

“Since it’s part of the medical center, there are exterior cameras on the buildings,” Matthew said. Out of habit, he scanned his environment constantly and had noticed those things on his first visit. “Couldn’t hurt to reach out to whoever is in charge of their system.”

“I’ll do that tomorrow,” Brendan agreed. “Let’s get going on those windows.”

Matthew and Brendan worked together for the next hour to add the window alarms and make sure everything connected to the control panels on the front and back doors and to the app that he’d had Kinley put on her phone. It was helpful to have Brendan’s assistance, since some of the work required dexterity that Matthew hadn’t yet regained. They tested the system and were satisfied that it was working correctly.

“Thanks for your help,” Matthew said as he walked Brendan out front.

“No problem. You’ll keep your eyes open, right?” Brendan asked.

“I will.” He still wasn’t satisfied that Kinley’s house was as secure as it could be, since she’d refused to add cameras, but it was better than it had been.

“Call if you need anything.” Brendan started to walk away, then turned back. “You know, you’d make a good detective if you’re looking to get out of the service.”

“Appreciate that, but I’m planning to stay in.” He wasn’t willing to give up the career that had saved him from making a mess of his life. If he hadn’t been nearly forced to join the Navy as a teenager, he’d be in a really different place. Probably one with cellblocks and razor wire.

He waved as Brendan pulled away, then went back into Kinley's house. He stopped in the living room, where Anaya was asleep on the couch. He stroked her curls before moving to the dining room. Kinley was seated at the table with her laptop open and a stack of papers in front of her.

"I hope it's okay if she naps. Her eyes were drooping," Kinley said when he took a seat near her.

"It's fine. I'll let her play outside after dinner, and she'll burn up her extra energy before bedtime. What's all this?"

"I have to update my adoption portfolio. I don't have a shed anymore, but I do have a security system."

"Do they need to know details like that?"

She looked at him, forehead furrowed. "My application has to be accurate. How else will the mothers know I'm a suitable candidate?"

"And you think all this gets read?"

"Of course. These women are making a huge decision about the future of the babies they're carrying. They need every ounce of data possible."

"Sometimes more is just more. It might overwhelm whoever is reading this, and they'll move on to the next portfolio."

Kinley sat back in her chair. "Really? In their place, I'd want to read every scrap of information I could get."

"That's you." And he adored that about her. She was persistent and smart, but other people's priorities were often different.

"I don't know." She moved a paper from one stack to another.

"Why don't we order some dinner and look through what you have?" He'd seen how important it was to her to adopt a child. And she was doing everything she could to help him rehabilitate his hand so he could return to the life he wanted—the least he could do was return the favor.

"Okay, but not pizza," she said. "The Hartsville Café downtown delivers. They make a great chicken marsala, and the salads are first-rate."

“I’m good with that.”

While they waited for their food to arrive, Matthew read over Kinley’s application. Much of it was standard documentation about her house and career, which was all fine. It was the personal profile that he suspected was the issue. She’d written about how her parents were successful professionals who had pushed her to excel beginning at a young age. She’d attended private schools from kindergarten on, taken music lessons and been in a youth orchestra, played on traveling soccer and volleyball teams, and studied ballet from the time she was three through to college.

He had to wonder when she’d had time to be a kid. Never, he suspected. By the time he reached the last page, he knew every detail of her biography, but he didn’t know *her*. That’s what was missing. Her application didn’t show who she was on the inside. Kinley was caring and warm, but this profile came off as stiff and uptight, especially with the final statement about giving her child all the opportunities she’d had. He knew she meant to sound generous, but others might interpret that as meaning she wanted to give *things* rather than giving love.

And that just wasn’t true about her. He decided to start there.

“Why don’t you dial this back a bit?” He pointed to her last paragraph.

“Why? I want to assure the birth mom that their child will have a full life. I can afford to give their baby everything a kid should have.”

“I’m not sure dance lessons or traveling soccer teams are necessities.” He kept his tone gentle.

“All of that formed who I became.” She seemed a bit affronted.

“And I’m glad you’re who you are, but did you ever have any free time?”

“I...” She went silent for a moment. “I didn’t. Every minute was scheduled. I remember this one time I was supposed to audition for a performing arts middle school. Mom dropped me off early and told me to go inside and warm up, but there

were some girls I knew from dance class and they were making friendship bracelets...”

“You stopped to play with them?”

“I did... and missed my time slot, which meant I didn’t get into the school. My parents were so angry with me. It took me a long time to understand that they showed their love by making sure I had every opportunity.”

“Whether you wanted it or not?”

“I guess so.” She took the three-page personal profile and scanned it. “I don’t want that for my kid.” She spoke like that was a revelation for her. “Should I rip this up?”

“Just tell your story differently, so it shows more about who you are. If they could see how caring you are with Anaya or the way you made daisy chains with Ava and Emma, these moms would be thrilled to give you their baby.”

“Thanks for saying that. It helps,” she said, her expression a blend of discouragement and determination. “I’ll rewrite this. Will you read it for me when I’m done?”

“Be happy to.”

“It’s daunting, you know.” She laughed. “I guess you do know. You ended up with Anaya unexpectedly. Doesn’t it scare you? I’m a little terrified of actually getting a child. What if I’m a bad mother?”

“You won’t be. And, yeah, I’m scared to death half the time. I never expected to be a father. I didn’t have one, so what do I know about it?”

“You didn’t know your dad?” Her expression was instantly sympathetic.

He shook his head. “Just Mom, Candace, and me. Mom worked all the time trying to cover the rent and buy food. Candace was older than me. We got along, but she had her friends and her own job. So I was left to fend for myself a lot.”

“Were you lonely?”

“Guess I was.” That was probably where the trouble began. “I started hanging with the wrong crowd in middle school. I knew they were bad kids, but... kids want to belong, you know.”

“How’d you go from that to being a Navy SEAL?”

“The hard way.” He hesitated, worried that she’d think less of him, but he went on. “I started boosting cars when I was sixteen.”

“You stole cars?” Her mouth popped open in shock.

“Not an unusual activity in the neighborhood where I grew up. Illegal, obviously, but the money I got helped my mom out.” That had helped him rationalize his actions for a while.

“What happened?”

“My high school principal caught me trying to steal his car. I was a senior by then, and it was a sweet Mustang.” A shiny black convertible. “He was a former Army Ranger. Tough as nails, and I grudgingly respected him. He gave me two choices: go to jail or join the military. He made me pick the branch right there and drove me to the recruiter’s office.”

“You got to ride in the sweet Mustang after all.” Her tone was teasing, but her eyes were serious as she leaned closer to him.

“I did.” He remembered that ride. He’d been shaking in his shoes, but also thrilled that someone had given a damn about him. “A few years later, I went back and thanked him when I was on leave. He knew what I hadn’t figured out and probably wouldn’t have on my own: I need structure and discipline. That saved me. So to get back to the point, being a parent, especially to a little girl, scares the crap out of me.”

“But you love Anaya and want what’s best for her. And you’ve learned a lot over the years about how to deal with stressful situations. That has to help, right?”

“Yeah—I just hope it’ll be enough.”

“I know it will.” She pressed her lips against his and stroked her fingers down his cheek. Her touch went straight through

him. He was reaching for her when the doorbell rang. She rested her forehead against his and sighed. "That's our dinner."

"Uncle Matthew?" Anaya's voice came from the living room.

"Coming, honey." He rose, pulled Kinley up with him, and kissed her. "I'd like to continue this later."

She moved away from him, but she was smiling.

Later didn't happen, to Matthew's chagrin. Anaya needed a bath and to be put to bed, while Kinley wanted to spend the evening rewriting her profile. And the next day wasn't any better. He didn't have a therapy appointment, and Kinley said she was booked from early morning through late afternoon.

The closest he got was seeing her arrive home in the evening and go into her house. She'd called to tell him she had charts to review and couldn't come over. Now he and his teammate Garrett were on their way to base for the day. Matthew would see Kinley later, though, since she was picking up Anaya from day care for him.

"You're quiet," Garrett commented. They'd met up early to make the drive together. Matthew was headed for an evaluation by the base doctors, and Garrett had training to attend. "I'm used to you talking my leg off."

"Just thinking." He wasn't ready to talk about Kinley and what seemed to be growing between them. Since the SEAL families in town were tight, he could guess that Mia had filled everyone in on the day they'd all played together in the park. And about how she'd given Matthew and Kinley an opportunity to be alone. No one needed to know about the kiss they'd shared. Not yet. "How's Harley doing?" he asked, knowing his teammate was easily distracted by any chance to talk about his girlfriend.

"She's good. The baby's popping out more every day." Garrett shot him a grin. It was hard for Matthew to picture his buddy

in a relationship, but he'd never seen Garrett happier. Garrett had been at a serious low point when they'd returned from their botched mission in Colombia. Their teammate and friend Sebastian had been killed, and Garrett had taken it hard. He'd found new direction for himself by protecting Sebastian's long-lost half-sister, who'd come to Hartsville to escape her abusive husband. Despite the tragic circumstances, there had been a happy ending: Harley and Garrett had fallen in love. Matthew was glad for both of them.

"She'll be here before you know it." The baby was due in the fall. "Ready to be a dad?"

"Sure am. Never expected it, but I'm ready. How's fatherhood going for you?"

"It has its ups and downs, but it's mostly good." He still hadn't worked out what to do with Anaya if he was approved for active duty and sent on a mission, but he had time. He was looking forward to being on base, though. It had felt good to put on his uniform that morning. The familiar clothing made him feel more himself, and reinforced the structure that had become the framework for his life.

When they arrived, Garrett headed to his training and Matthew reported to the base hospital, where the doctors put him through his paces to test his hand. They were closemouthed about his progress, but Matthew knew he could do much more than the last time he'd been here, before he started working with Kinley.

His strength and dexterity had improved. Some things they asked him to do were still tough, but tough was better than impossible, which had been the case previously. Matthew was feeling good until he walked into the officers' mess where he and Garrett were meeting their fellow teammate and friend Jonathan for a late lunch.

As the team leader on their last mission, Jonathan bore the brunt of responsibility for everything that had gone wrong. Not that anyone could have foreseen the events that unfolded. But a SEAL had died, and more were injured. The brass was screaming for explanations and looking to place blame.

Jonathan was clearly taking heat. He had lost weight, and his face was etched with worry lines.

“How’s it going?” Matthew asked after shaking Jonathan’s hand and taking a seat.

“Been better.”

“You look like shit,” Garrett commented.

Jonathan shrugged and turned to Matthew. “What did the docs say about your hand?”

“Nothing definite, but it’s getting better every day. I’ll be back out there soon.”

“You seem good,” Jonathan said after eyeing him. “Better than I’ve seen you in a while.”

“It’s the good living in Hartsville,” Matthew joked. It was partially true, though.

“Maybe I should try that. I’ve got some leave coming. When I’m here, I constantly get called into people’s offices and asked to review the events of the mission. I’ve done that so many times that it’s starting to feel like fiction to me, like a movie I keep rewatching. The ending doesn’t get any better.”

Matthew hated to see Jonathan so down. Between his sister’s death, his injury, and taking guardianship of a toddler, Matthew’s life since the mission hadn’t been all sunshine, but he was managing to keep his head above water. Jonathan looked like he might slip below the surface at any moment.

“Why don’t you come for a visit?” Matthew said. “I’ve got a spare room in the house I’m renting.”

“Or you could stay with me and Harley. We’d be happy to have you,” Garrett offered.

Jonathan gave a dry chuckle. “I’m not horning in on you and Harley. Us bachelors will stick together.” Garrett shot Matthew a look but kept his mouth shut. Mia had definitely been talking.

“Glad to have you,” Matthew said. Over the course of lunch, Jonathan’s mood improved, and they agreed that he’d come

down as soon as he could arrange his leave.

On the drive back to Hartsville, Matthew expected Garrett to ask about his relationship with his neighbor and therapist. Garrett was usually pretty straight-up about those things, but he kept the conversation on more neutral topics. Matthew tried to follow along, but his head was full of Anaya and Kinley. Never in all the years he'd been a SEAL had he had someone waiting for him at home. It was different, and he liked it way more than he'd have thought he would.

When Garrett pulled up in front of Matthew's house, Matthew said a quick goodbye and let himself in the front door. He immediately heard laughter and music and smelled something delicious. The thought flashed through his brain that this was how it was supposed to be, coming home to people he cared about. But that had never been part of his plan.

At that moment, the plan didn't matter. He couldn't get to the kitchen fast enough. He gave Anaya a kiss on the cheek where she sat in her booster seat with a bowl in front of her. "How's my girl?"

"Great."

"And what are you making?"

"Cupcakes!"

"Sounds yummy." The concoction she was mixing looked like flour and water, which he suspected it was, since Kinley was taking a tray of cupcakes from the oven. He let her put the hot pan down before sweeping her up and dancing with her to the beat of the music that poured through his Bluetooth speakers.

"How are you?" he asked as he guided her around the island.

"Wonderful." She took off her oven mitts and tossed them onto the counter, then let her hands rest on his shoulders. "Even better now that you're home."

Based on her expression, her own words surprised her, but he liked hearing them. He wanted to kiss her, really kiss her, but he settled for having her in his arms for now. That "later" she'd promised him, though... that was going to happen as soon as Anaya went to bed.

He twirled Kinley twice before his niece held her hands up. “Me dance, too.”

“You’d better give the princess a turn,” Kinley said. She would have stepped out of his arms, but he held her a second longer.

“We’ll dance again later,” he whispered into her ear.

“Hope so.” Her eyes were bright as she returned to the other side of the counter, and he picked up Anaya. The little girl’s fingers were sticky with dough, but he’d stripped off his uniform shirt on the drive home, so he didn’t mind when she left streaks on his T-shirt.

“Twirl,” Anaya commanded. He spun her around three times before setting her on the edge of the counter to watch Kinley remove the cupcakes from the pan.

“Those smell great. Is there an occasion?” he asked.

“Kids are never too young to learn how much fun baking can be,” she said. “But, yeah, I did have good news from the adoption agency.”

“A baby?” he asked.

“Possibly. I don’t want to get my hopes up too much, but a mother is seriously considering my application. My contact there thought it was because of the changes I made. Thanks for that. I can’t tell you how much it means to me.” She was smiling, and he saw happy tears form in her eyes.

“I just suggested you be yourself.” He’d take a little credit for helping her, but she was the one who’d rewritten the profile. “We should take a picture of this scene”—he gestured around the kitchen—“to convince mothers of how good you are with kids.”

“I’m having fun. She’s a treasure.” Kinley smiled at Anaya. He’d figured the same thing out. He’d had some definite moments of being on the struggle bus, and he knew there were more to come. It was all worth it, though.

“She is.” He ruffled the little girl’s hair. “I’ll bet she was a big help.”

“Absolutely. When these cupcakes cool, she’s going to help me frost them and add sprinkles. In the meantime, we should get dinner going. Are you ready for some occupational therapy? I’ve got all the supplies for a good meal.”

“Let me wash up.”

He had to chuckle, because Kinley had clearly planned their menu with the intent of challenging his fine motor skills. Slicing mushrooms and dicing onions required all his concentration. She didn’t hover over him, but she gave advice and words of encouragement. After that, he had to cut the chicken into chunks and dredge it in flour, then egg and milk, then seasoned panko crumbs. Gripping the utensils challenged him, and she probably could have done it much faster, but he made it work.

“Put those in the frying pan,” she said, indicating the one where she already had the mushrooms and onions sautéing. “And I’ll take it from here.”

“What’s my next task?” he asked, knowing she wasn’t done with him.

“You could set the dining room table.” She pointed to the silverware and napkins already on the counter. “My risotto’s coming along nicely, so we should be ready to eat in about ten minutes.”

“I’ll need your help,” he said to Anaya, who had been coloring while they cooked. He leaned closer to whisper, “We have a secret mission. Come on.” He left the supplies in the dining room before leading Anaya to Kinley’s backyard. “We need flowers. You have to help me pick out a bouquet for Kinley. What do you think she’ll like?”

“Roses.” Anaya ran to a pink rose bush and pointed to several blooms. He sliced them off with his pocketknife. More occupational therapy. “What else?”

She took him around the yard, pointing out different flowers. He didn’t know the names, but in a few minutes, he had what he thought was a pretty nice collection. “Let’s find a vase.” He’d rented the house furnished, and he’d noticed a vase on

the upper shelf in the hall closet. He got the flowers arranged and placed on the table just as Kinley called that dinner would be served in two minutes.

Hastily, he set out the silverware and napkins. He was helping Anaya into her chair when Kinley carried in two plates from the kitchen. She stopped in her tracks and smiled.

“Beautiful,” she said. “And sweet. Thank you both.”

“You said that you didn’t bring flowers into the house often enough.” He was happy he’d pleased her.

“I picked,” Anaya said.

“You did a lovely job.” Kinley put a plate of chicken already cut into toddler-sized bites in front of her. She was going to make a great mom. He could see that in everything she did.

They settled down to eat, and he noticed how Kinley balanced the conversation between adult talk and including Anaya. He was still learning how to do that. Afterward, he did the dishes while Kinley and Anaya frosted the cupcakes. Kinley wisely had the little girl add the sprinkles inside the lid of a box so they didn’t scatter all over the kitchen.

“Where’d you learn that trick? Your mother?” From what she’d said, her mom didn’t seem like the bake-with-kids type.

“No, I saw it on Pinterest and thought it was clever.”

“I guess I ought to look there for ideas of things to do with Anaya.” He’d done some reading, but it wouldn’t hurt to try out social media.

“You’d be surprised at what people have come up with to make things easier and more fun.”

“Any suggestions for the bedtime ritual?” He was managing, but it could be a challenge.

“From what I’ve seen, parents recommend sticking to a routine and making sure the kids are worn out.”

“Works for me.” They went outside and played in the backyard until the fireflies came out and Anaya’s eyes were drooping. After a quick bath and a story, she was lights-out.

He took the baby monitor, a bottle of wine, and two glasses to his back deck, where Kinley had said she'd wait for him. She'd turned on a string of white lights and had soft music playing on her phone, but she wasn't relaxing. She was fussing with the one potted plant he had out there. Anaya had seen it one day when they were at the home improvement store and insisted he buy it.

"Time to enjoy," he said. He poured a glass of wine and handed it to her. "What kind of plant is that, anyway?"

"This is a geranium." She pointed to the largest plant in the pot, which had several bright pink blooms. "And these are petunias." The purple flowers surrounded the center one.

"Anaya claimed they were princess colors."

"They are that." She took a sip of her wine. "Is she sleeping?"

He nodded. "She's out."

"Well, then, I think we should continue our dance." She set her glass down. "Since we're alone."

She stepped into his arms, looping hers around his neck. She dropped her head onto his shoulder, and they swayed together to the music and the sound of the crickets. Holding her was nice. It made him feel... complete, which was a weird thought, but he couldn't shake it.

When she looked up and met his gaze, he had to think she was feeling the same way. He lowered his head to kiss her, and her response was instant. He pulled her tighter against him, knowing that she'd feel how much he desired her.

But tonight was about something else. He wanted a connection with her. He wanted to show her how beautiful he thought she was, inside and out. He couldn't stop his hands from sliding over her body, though, and he moaned when she reached under his T-shirt to knead the muscles of his back. It was all so good. They could be, *would* be good together.

Soon. For now, her kiss and touch were enough.

Kinley stepped out into her backyard for just a minute. She had to return to work, but she'd run home for lunch and wanted a moment in the sunshine, among her flowers. Out of habit, she glanced toward Matthew's yard. He was on his deck, talking on the phone, and there was something about his posture that caught her eye. It was very straight, erect as if he were standing at attention. She didn't mean to stare, but she couldn't help herself. In the four days since they'd danced and kissed on his deck, all she'd wanted to do was be with him. They'd shared cooking duties again, twice at her house and once at his, and she couldn't seem to get enough of him, his kisses, his company.

She had it bad and knew it.

He put his phone in his pocket and did a fist pump. Something good must have happened.

"You all right, neighbor?" she called over the fence.

"Awesome." He opened the gate and strode toward her. "That was my CO. The base doctors cleared me to return to duty. It's training duty, not explosives work, but it's a big step closer to getting back to my team."

"Oh." She faltered for a second before recovering. "That's great."

"All thanks to you, according to the docs. They said I've made such strides with my therapy here that I only need four more weeks—and I can do those on base. They'll assess again at the end of that to see when I can get back to defusing bombs."

How anyone could be gleeful about working with explosives was beyond her, but she was glad for him. Cautiously glad. He was clearly over-the-moon excited.

“Let me take you to dinner tonight,” he said. “We’ve never done that, and I want to thank you. I know this wouldn’t have been possible without your work. You pushed me, and I appreciate that.”

“I’m happy for you. Dinner would be great.” She smiled and tucked her worries away.

“I’ll ask Mia and Kenton to watch Anaya for the evening. It’ll be nice to have a kid-free meal. Is seven good?”

“Yes. Perfect.”

He cupped her cheek and kissed her. They’d shared plenty of kisses over the past days, but each one took her by surprise. She’d gone so long being alone. She’d stopped even thinking about dating at some point in the past few years, which made each one of Matthew’s kisses all the more special.

“Uncle Matthew,” Anaya called from his yard.

“I’ll see you tonight,” he said and brushed his lips across hers one more time before stepping away.

His kisses scrambled her brain, so she was back in her office before she really thought through what he’d told her. He was returning to base, which meant she wouldn’t see him anymore. That was tough to take, but it was what he wanted.

By midafternoon, she’d received a fax from the base doctors requesting all of Matthew’s records. Since her three o’clock appointment canceled, she used the unexpected free time to write up her final summary of his progress, which required her to go over all her notes, from her initial assessment to their last session together the day before.

He’d made progress, remarkable progress, but she wasn’t convinced it was or ever would be enough to let him get back to the delicate work of defusing bombs. A shudder went through her at the thought of him doing that. How many times had he put his life at risk? She didn’t want to know.

She took extra care to write a thorough report, sticking to facts and data. She wasn't going to skew her assessment in any way. She trusted that any physical therapist reading the report would see what she did. Matthew had gained so much ground, but his fine motor skills continued to be impaired. No amount of therapy could fully reverse the effects from the crushed bones, burns, and nerve damage. In everyday life, he would eventually be able to function fine. He could manage training and, perhaps, rejoin his SEAL team, but not in the capacity that he had filled before.

She finished her report and sent it to the base doctors. They could do with it what they wished. She'd fulfilled her obligation as a therapist. As a woman, she felt... bruised. Matthew had been so excited to leave Hartsville. She understood that he'd gotten the news he'd wanted about his hand, but she'd thought that she had become important to him, too.

The time they'd spent together was special to her, and she wanted to cling to it. The same must not be true for him. He'd been waiting to leave all along. She shouldn't be surprised by that, but she couldn't deny her disappointment.

She did her best to put that away while she worked with her other patients. Her last session ran over, and she made it home only thirty minutes before their date. By then, she'd decided that she was just going to enjoy being with Matthew tonight. That was what mattered.

She took a quick shower, slipped on a black knit dress that showed her curves, and added mascara and bright red lipstick. If this was going to be their one and only real date, she might as well look the part. When he came to her front door, she could tell from his expression that she'd hit the mark.

"You look amazing." He leaned in to kiss her cheek. "Gorgeous."

She laughed. She wasn't gorgeous, but she appreciated his compliment. "I like this on you, too." He wore a blue dress shirt, rolled back to the elbows, and black pants that fit just right.

“I skipped the tie,” he admitted.

“I won’t tell the dating police.” It was easy to fall into flirty banter with him, so she put away her concerns and the edge of heartache she felt about him leaving, and went with it.

He took her to a restaurant on the other side of Lake Hart that had a view of the water and a laid-back vibe.

“Nice place,” she commented when the server had taken their drinks order.

“I never knew it existed, but Patrick recommended it.”

“Patrick is the one whose wife is a teacher, right? And they have two kids?” He’d talked about his SEAL friends and their families enough that she felt she knew them.

“Right. And a third on the way.”

She felt the slight twinge of jealousy that always got her when she heard of women who were pregnant. She dismissed it quickly. It was no one’s fault that she couldn’t have children. And—thanks to Matthew’s advice—there was a real possibility that a mother was going to choose her.

“He’s not on your SEAL team, though.”

“No. Patrick, Kenton, and Anderson are on a different team.”

“But you know them?” She was curious about the path he’d chosen and seemed to love so much.

“The SEALs are a small community, and tight-knit. When I came to town, it was easy to connect with them, and we became friends. I’d like you to meet them and their families. They helped me so much when I needed the support.”

“Then I’d like to.” She had no idea if or when that would happen, since Matthew was leaving Hartsville soon. She still couldn’t get her head around that, but she smiled at him and listened as he talked about his buddies and how excited he was to be back on active duty.

They made it all the way to dessert before she found herself asking the obvious question. “What’ll happen with Anaya if you’re living on base—or if you go on a mission?”

“Yeah. I...” He stopped eating the piece of carrot cake that they’d decided to split and put his fork down. “That’s the tough part.”

“I’m sure you’ll work it out,” she said quickly, not wanting to ruin the ambience of their date. “You’re an amazing father to her, even if you are coming at it in an unusual way.”

“She’s just gotten into a routine with the day care here.” He seemed to deflate. “I hate to disrupt that, but I don’t have a choice.”

He did have a choice, she wanted to say. He could leave the Navy or, at least, quit the SEALs. But she’d come to know him too well in the past weeks to think that was realistic. So she kept her thoughts to herself.

“The base has good childcare,” he said. “I checked into it. While I’m doing training, that’ll work. But, yeah, if I get deployed...”

“I’m sure you could hire a nanny, but you’d want to do that in advance so Anaya is used to them before you go.” The girl had already experienced immense upheaval in her life with her mother’s death. She seemed well-adjusted and happy with Matthew, but she might—probably would—perceive him going away as another loss.

It wasn’t her business, she reminded herself. Matthew hadn’t suggested that they had anything more than a casual relationship. What he decided to do with his niece was entirely up to him.

“That was my thought, too,” he agreed. “I guess I better start the search, huh?”

The sun had set while they ate, and their drive back to Hartsville was dark and quiet. The date had crossed the line from fun to serious, and it didn’t seem likely to go back. The fact was that Matthew was leaving, and she would be smart to protect her heart and not get any more attached to him than she already was.

She could have invited him in when he walked her to her door. Anaya was with his friends for the night, so he’d be free to

stay. They could make love. As much as she wanted that, though, it wouldn't be wise. A few nights ago, she might have suggested it. But everything had changed, so she gave him a brief kiss and closed the door.

To her disappointment, she realized that he hadn't pushed for more. If he'd asked to come in or kissed her the way he had other times, she would have been unable to resist him. They would have tumbled into her bed and made love. She sighed as she stepped out of her high-heeled sandals.

She wanted him. She wouldn't deny that. But she'd done the right thing. It was just hard to believe that when her house echoed with silence. She could fill it with music, but it wouldn't help. She went into her kitchen and put the kettle on the stove. She'd have a cup of chamomile tea, though she knew it was more out of habit than anything. What might help her sleep in an ordinary situation wouldn't work tonight.

While waiting for the water to boil, she went upstairs to change into pajamas, considering whether to watch a movie or read a book to take up the empty hours. Hours she could have spent in Matthew's arms... but she wasn't foolish or brave enough to be with a man who was moving on.

She was in the bathroom, washing off her makeup, when an explosion rocked the house. It knocked her to the floor, and she narrowly missed smashing her head on the porcelain bathtub. She got to her knees, assessing herself for injury before crawling into her bedroom, where she smelled smoke and heard the crackle of a fire.

Explosion, fire. Her mind was spinning, and she struggled to understand, but self-preservation kicked in as she made her way to the top of the stairs. She could see flames in her living room, licking up the curtains and traveling across the floor.

Oh, God! She couldn't panic. She just had to get out another way. Retreating to her bedroom, she closed the door to keep out the heat and flames. There were two windows in the room, but it would be a long drop to the ground below. She opened one and peered out into the darkness, seeing no choice but to

chance it. Before she could hoist herself over the ledge, though, her bedroom door burst open.

“Kinley!” Matthew ran to her. “Did you... Are you...?”

“I’m okay, but my house is on fire.” It was a bizarre statement of the obvious, but it was all she could think of to say.

“There was an explosion. I’ve got to get you out.”

“The window.” She was still near it.

“Too far to the ground.” He dashed into her bathroom and ran the water, then returned with a dripping towel. “Put this around your head, covering your face and your hair.”

She followed his instructions, and before she could do anything else, he lifted her in his arms and charged for the staircase.

Matthew sprinted through the flames, which had become more intense in the minute he'd been upstairs. He felt the heat scorching his skin, but he kept moving. His only thought was to get Kinley to safety. She clung to him, the wet towel protecting her head, as he raced through the living room and out the front door. Only when they were a safe distance from the house did he put her down, but her legs gave out and she sagged to the ground.

"It's okay. You're safe," he said, squatting next to her with his hand on her back. In the distance he could hear sirens, the fire department responding. A neighbor must have called 9-1-1. He didn't care about that. He cared about the woman on the grass with him.

He'd been standing on his back deck, thinking about how he'd wanted to stay with her after their date and make love, when the explosion knocked him back a step. He hadn't hesitated. His only thought was to get to her and get her out of the burning house. He'd kicked down the door and charged in, guessing that she was upstairs since he'd seen a light go on up there.

"My house," she moaned, but she was shaking too hard to say more.

"Come inside." He gestured to his place, but she shook her head. Shock was setting in, so he held her, warming her with his body heat until the firefighters arrived and gave him a blanket. He pulled her out of the way as hoses were strung

across her yard and water doused the flames. Her shivering subsided, but she said nothing as the firefighters did their job. The worst of the flames were knocked down within half an hour, but still she didn't move, and he couldn't leave her side.

Brendan walked across the lawn toward them. "I'm sorry, Kinley. I heard it on the scanner and came over."

As he'd watched Kinley's home burn, Matthew's mind had been busy working on theories about the explosion and fire. He met Brendan's gaze over Kinley's head and saw the other man's concern. He must be thinking the same thing. This wasn't an accident.

"Can you answer a few questions for me and the fire chief?" Another man approached them, and Brendan introduced him as Chief Vance.

"Sure. Of course." Kinley got to her feet, shaking off Matthew's hold.

"You were home?" Brendan pulled out a small notebook.

"I'd just gotten home. I'd been out to dinner with Matthew." Her voice faltered but then gained strength. "I went in the house and put the kettle on to make a cup of tea, then went upstairs to change."

"Gas stove or electric?" the fire chief asked.

"Gas. Why?"

"Part of the report," the chief said as he jotted notes down on a clipboard. "Tell us what happened after that."

"There was an explosion that knocked me off my feet, and then flames and smoke. I was figuring out how to get out of the house from an upstairs window when Matthew came in to rescue me. He carried me out."

"What about you?" Brendan turned to Matthew.

He went through hearing the blast and running into the house to find Kinley. He didn't talk about his heart-stopping panic that she'd been injured or killed. He kept that part to himself, but it had been what drove him.

“Next time, you might want to leave the rescuing part to the professionals,” the chief advised. “You took a hell of a risk.”

Matthew shrugged. He’d taken worse risks in his career, and he’d do the same thing a hundred times over so long as it meant Kinley was safe.

“The fire inspector will come in the morning to determine the cause of the blaze,” the chief said. “It began in the living room near the fireplace, but that’s all I can say for sure tonight. I’ll leave a truck and a couple men here for the next few hours to make sure there aren’t any hot spots.”

Matthew waited for the fire chief to walk away before turning to Brendan. “You know this wasn’t an accident.”

“That’s my guess,” the detective said. “Houses don’t spontaneously explode, but we’ll have to wait for the inspector’s report. I’ve worked with the chief enough to know he suspects something’s up. Maybe we’ll get a lead out of this that we can use. You’ve had too many close calls, Kinley.”

“I agree. Thanks for coming, Brendan,” she said.

“Do you have a safe place to stay tonight?” The detective put his notebook in his shirt pocket.

“She’ll be staying with me,” Matthew answered and felt her focus turn to him. She might not like that he’d made the declaration, but in his opinion, it was the only option. He needed her close to him.

“Good. You can look out for her. I’ll talk to you soon.” Brendan left after stopping to exchange a few words with the chief.

“Come into the house, Kinley.” Matthew put his arm around her again and realized she was still shaking. “There’s nothing more we can do tonight.”

She hesitated, watching as the fire department rolled up their hoses. Was she going to argue with him? He thought so for a minute, but then she shook her head. “I guess you’re right.”

He led her inside and to his room. He could have put her in the guest room, but his bed was much more comfortable, and his

bedroom had an attached bathroom. “Why don’t you take a shower? I’ll find some clothes for you that don’t smell like smoke. Then you can get some rest.”

While she was in the bathroom, he located a pair of gym shorts and a sweatshirt for her to wear. They’d be way too big, but they were better than nothing. He briefly considered calling Mia and asking to borrow something of hers, but it was too late at night for that. He’d take care of it tomorrow. He put the clothing in a pile just outside the bathroom door and went to the kitchen to make some hot chocolate.

About the time it was ready, he heard the shower turn off. He poured a cup and waited. Would Kinley come find him or just crawl into bed? Did she need to be alone or want company? He wanted to hold her, give her comfort, and help her forget the day. But he’d do whatever she needed.

“Matthew?” he heard her call.

“Coming.” He took the mug of chocolate and went to her. She was sitting on the edge of his bed, her petite frame lost in his sweatshirt. “Are you feeling any better?”

“I can’t stop shaking,” she said, her eyes huge. “I can usually handle surprises, but...”

“This was more than a surprise.” He set the mug on the nightstand and went to sit next to her. “You’re safe now. I won’t let anything happen to you.” He made the promise intending to keep it. He was angry about what she’d gone through, but he put a lid on that. It wouldn’t help Kinley. For now, all he could do was take care of her. “How can I make it better?”

“Hold me. Kiss me.” She turned to him. “I want to feel you against me.”

“I’ll hold you while you sleep,” he promised.

“No, that’s not enough. Make love to me.”

There was nothing he wanted more, but he had to be sure about her reasons. “Kinley.” He touched her face, and she gave him the tiniest smile as if anticipating his concern.

“I’m making a choice to be with you, Matthew,” she said. “I know what I’m doing. I almost invited you to stay over, earlier. I’m glad I didn’t. You might have been hurt.”

After what she’d been through, she was worrying about him?

“Do you want me?” Her tone was plaintive.

“So much,” he whispered, wishing he were able to put what he felt into words.

Her breath whooshed out. “Good. Will you kiss me now?”

He held off long enough to lift her from the bed’s edge and remove the bedspread, then laid her gently in the center of the mattress and joined her there. Finally, he let himself kiss her, his body half covering hers. She melted into him until he didn’t know where she ended and he began. Something in his head suggested that this was meant to be, just like it had felt right to be with her all along. He couldn’t explain it, but he was glad to give in to the feeling.

The kiss deepened, and all he wanted was to bury himself in her, but he wasn’t in a hurry. Well, not too much of a hurry. He sensed that she needed to take it slow, so they would.

“Are you warm yet?” he asked minutes later.

“Burning up.” Her hands were buried in his hair, and her eyes were soft with desire. “I don’t want to move. I don’t want you to move.”

“Not even to take this off?” He plucked at the front of the sweatshirt she was wearing. “It looks cute on you, but I’m kind of dying to know what’s underneath.” He’d spent a fair amount of time thinking about that in the past week.

She gave him a small smile. “Just an average human body. Nothing special about it.”

“Says the doctor.” He put his hands to the hem of the garment. “I see things differently. Let me take it off you.”

She paused for just a second and then lifted her arms so he could slide the sweatshirt up and over her head. She wore nothing underneath. He sucked in a breath.

“See? Breasts are breasts,” she said.

“You are so wrong about that. Yours are beautiful.” He couldn’t help but stare at them. They were perfectly sized, with dark pink nipples. Slowly, he lowered his head and took one nipple into his mouth, gently sucking on it. She gasped sharply and arched into him. So much for nothing special, he thought, as he kissed his way to her other breast.

Her breathing became increasingly ragged as he moved down her torso to the waistband of his gym shorts. There was something super sexy about her wearing his clothes—and something even better about taking them off her. He slid his fingers under the elastic and worked the shorts down her legs and off.

She was naked in his bed, and it was amazing that he could put two coherent thoughts together. He sure wasn’t going to manage more than two. When he looked at her face, she was smiling at him. It was a soft, knowing, womanly smile. He was putty in her hands. He knew it and didn’t care. All he wanted to do was please her.

He slipped his hand between her thighs, widening the space there, before dragging his fingers across her sex. It was hot and moist, and he couldn’t resist stroking her until she moaned his name.

“So warm now,” she murmured as she stretched her arms over her head, elongating her body. Nothing could have been more arousing. “Take your clothes off, Matthew. I want to see you.” Except maybe those words from her lips.

He hadn’t changed after their date. It was easy enough to kick off his shoes and shed his pants, but the tiny buttons of his dress shirt slowed him down. He struggled, his fingers lacking the dexterity needed to undo them quickly. He was sitting on the edge of the bed working them when her arms came around him.

“Let me help.” Her nimble fingers were already undoing the buttons.

“My therapist wouldn’t like that,” he teased. “She’d make me do it.”

“Sounds like a real stickler, but I bet she’d bend the rules this once.”

His shirt was completely open by then, so she slipped it down his arms and tossed it aside. “I imagine you can handle the briefs on your own.” She lay back, her fingers idly running over her toned stomach. He was sure it wasn’t a calculated move, but, damn, it was hot. His dick got even harder. Her eyes widened when he shucked his briefs and rejoined her in the center of the bed.

“Just an average human body,” he whispered as their naked bodies made contact for the first time. “Isn’t that what you said?”

He held himself just above her, not wanting to crush her, and her hands glided down his chest and stomach. “Yours seems to be a better-than-average specimen.”

“Good to know.” He squeezed his eyes shut in pure pleasure when her hand stroked up his length and her thumb rubbed the tip of his erection.

“You like that,” she whispered and did it again, gripping tighter. He nearly came then and there, which would have been good but wasn’t what he wanted.

Joining with her—loving her—was all he could think about, so he captured her hands and laced their fingers together. He started another kiss, this one soul deep. He’d never felt more connected to anyone. He could have kissed her forever, but his body was making demands. He broke away from her long enough to get a condom from the nightstand drawer. He rolled it on in record time because everything in him wanted to get back to her.

Her arms came around him. “I want you inside me,” she whispered. “Now.” Her kisses on his jaw and neck drove him on, so he pushed into her, reveling in the velvet feel of her body. He stayed still for ten rapid heartbeats, kissing her and letting her adjust to his size.

“Kinley, sweetheart.” It was all he could get out, but she seemed to understand. She wrapped her legs around him and arched upward, opening to him. He drove deeper into her, finding pleasure for them both, until they tumbled over the edge.

Afterward, she snuggled against him and was asleep almost instantly. He didn't stay awake long, but he was pretty sure he drifted off with a smile on his face.

Kinley canceled her therapy appointments for the next few days. She needed some time to breathe, and her efficient receptionist made it easy. One phone call to Beth, and Kinley knew the slate would be wiped clean and rescheduled. She was grateful to have so many people in her corner. That included Mia, who had dropped off a bag of clothes and toiletries for her.

Kinley was dreading her next phone call, which wasn't going to be so simple. She had been avoiding calling her parents and ignoring her mother's emails. She loved her parents, but the conversation always took the same turn: come home. That would only increase when they learned about the fire. Even so, she had to tell them. This was too big an event to keep quiet about—they would eventually find out and be horrified that she hadn't contacted them right away.

Julia and Tom James never relented on their goals. As a child, Kinley had been carried along with them, and they'd fast-tracked her through K-12, college, and graduate school. Moving to Hartsville had given her the distance and perspective she needed. She was driven to succeed, but her choices were under her control. When she talked with her parents, she still felt like a teenager trying to exert what little say she had in her life.

With a sigh, she dialed her mom's number and wasn't surprised when the call was answered on the first ring. "Hi, Mom."

“Finally,” Julia said. “I’ve been so worried about you, honey.”

“I’m sorry for not getting in touch sooner, but I’ve been busy with my practice.” And with the handsome SEAL whose house she was now staying in. She’d woken in Matthew’s arms that morning, completely content. A night that had started traumatically had ended peacefully in his bed. After he rocked her world, that is. Matthew’s kisses had been the best of her life, and so had his lovemaking.

“What’s the matter, Kinley?” her mother asked, bringing her back to the moment. “Something is; I can tell from your voice. Is your practice failing? You could come back to Atlanta. You know Atlanta General would hire you in a second.”

“It’s not that. My practice is thriving.” She might as well get it over with, so she plunged ahead. “My house caught fire last night.”

“Oh my goodness. Are you okay? Was your house destroyed?” The one thing Julia James liked about Hartsville was Kinley’s lovely home. It was on a slightly smaller scale than many in the area, but it was beautiful. At least, it had been until the night before.

“I’m fine, but my house is unlivable for now.” She glanced out the window toward her home. It wasn’t a complete loss, she didn’t think, but restoring it would take time and work.

“Were you home when it happened?”

“I was.” She told her mother, quickly and with minimal drama, how Matthew rescued her from her bedroom and got her out. She skipped the part where he carried her to safety. “I’m staying at his house for now. It’s the ranch right next to my place.”

“Oh, that’s a darling house, too.” Her mother would remember the neighborhood, even though she rarely visited Hartsville. Kinley was always expected to come home to Atlanta. “How well do you know this neighbor?”

“He was a patient, although that’s come to an end.” Just as well, given the current situation.

“You’re dating a patient?” Her mother’s voice pitched upward.

“No, Mom.” She wasn’t going to get into the specifics of her relationship with Matthew. They weren’t dating. Dinner out the night before was the closest they’d come. Other than that, it was shared meals and time in their adjacent backyards. With some dancing. And a few kisses. Not dating per se. They’d just been sort of... swept along by whatever was between them. Okay, so she had woken up in his bed this morning. But he wasn’t her patient anymore. She knew she’d been skating too close to the line in terms of ethics even with their earlier interactions, but they hadn’t come close to anything like this.

“Good.” Her mother sounded relieved. “I know you’d never do anything so unprofessional. Is he a nice man? He must be, to be so helpful to you.”

“He is. He’s a Navy SEAL who needed some rehabilitation after an injury.” Out the window, she could see a man studying the exterior of her house. He wore a fire helmet with “Inspector” printed on it.

“Well, that’s good,” Julia said.

“I do have some good news as well. I’m being considered for adoption by a mother.” Kinley was eager to change the topic, even though this was a dicey one with her parents, too. They’d been fine with the idea of adopting after she was married, but they weren’t thrilled about her taking on a child on her own.

“Oh, sweetie, you’ve been here before and been disappointed.”

“I know, but I think my chances are better this time.” She really felt that.

“But... how could you take a baby with your house in a shambles? The adoption agency will never approve that.”

Kinley’s heart sank as she realized that her mother was right. Why hadn’t that occurred to her? She had no stable home to give to a child until the repairs could be made. By then, it would be too late for this mother. Someone else would be selected to take her baby. Kinley’s bubble of hope burst into nothingness. She’d gritted her way through the other recent rough spots, but this blow made her queasy.

She felt guilty, too. Just as her mom had delivered her a severe reality check, Kinley had done the same to Matthew at dinner the night before. She'd crushed his excitement about returning to base by pointing out that he had to make arrangements for Anaya.

"Come home, Kinley," her mother pleaded for the umpteenth time. "You're too young to bury yourself in that little town, and it's caused you nothing but grief. Darren left you because he hated living there, and now this."

Darren hadn't liked Hartsville, but that wasn't the reason for their breakup, as her mother well knew. He'd wanted a wife who could give him a child, and that wasn't her. Moreover, her practice here had been nothing but successful. She'd built it up on her own and was proud of her work. It was true that Frank's... she didn't even know what to call them... were a problem right now, but she'd get through this.

"Hartsville is home to me now, Mom. I've told you that before. How's Dad?" Kinley was happy when her mother didn't push the issue, and instead filled her in on her father's semiretired state and the organizations he participated in. He was a civic do-gooder, so there was plenty to hear about. Kinley half listened as she watched the inspector enter her house. Finally, with a promise to call or email updates, she was able to get off the phone.

She went to the backyard, where she wasn't surprised to see Matthew watching her house. Anaya played nearby, but he was only paying cursory attention to her. For some reason, his stance seemed wider, more determined than she'd ever seen before. His arms were crossed over his chest.

"Hi," she said, going to stand next to him.

"Hey." He barely looked at her and made no move to touch her, his attention on what was going on at her house.

"Have they learned anything?" she asked.

"Not that I could tell from here. Brendan said he'd stop over later with the report." He glanced at Anaya, who was sitting in the yard, attempting to make a daisy chain. "I need to beef up

security on this house while you're staying. I wasn't that concerned about it for me and Anaya—no one's threatening us—but with you here, things are different.”

“Don't go to extra trouble on my account,” she said and got a look from him.

“How were your parents?”

“Fine.” She'd told him that she was going to call. “Not pleased with me for living in Hartsville, but that's nothing new. They're always pressuring me to move back to Atlanta. I don't know when they're going to figure out that's not happening.” She caught herself before continuing. She wasn't being thoughtful. “I'm sorry. I shouldn't complain about them.” Matthew didn't have any family except his niece, and here she was griping about her parents—who did love her, even if they showed it in unhelpful ways.

He shrugged that off. “It's too bad they aren't more supportive of you.”

“They mean well, but sometimes I get frustrated with them.” She needed to get to her point. “My mother... she pointed out that my chances of adopting now are reduced. I don't have a home for a baby, not to mention I seem to be accident-prone.”

“These aren't accidents.”

“Uncle Matthew, you play with me,” Anaya called.

“Not now, honey.” Matthew's refusal surprised Kinley. Not once in all the time they'd spent together had she seen him deny attention to his niece. He really was in a different place today. Protective and standoffish. She hoped it would pass.

“My point is... I owe you an apology.”

“How's that?” He gave her a look.

“Mom burst my happy bubble about adopting with a few words. I did the same to you last night when you were excited about returning to base. I brought up Anaya and childcare and took away some of your joy. I'm sorry about that.”

“You didn't say anything that I didn't need to hear. I haven't worked out how I'll manage yet, and I need to address that.

Here comes Brendan.”

She thought they had more to talk about, but Matthew was all business as the police detective came into the yard.

“What did you find out?” Matthew asked.

“Hey, Kinley. Are you hanging in there today?” Brendan turned his attention to her without responding to Matthew’s question. At least Brendan understood that she was having an emotional day. Matthew didn’t seem to grasp that. He’d held her in the night, but when the sun came up it was like someone had flipped a switch. Was this what SEALs were like when they were in mission mode?

“I’ll be all right, especially if you tell me that the fire was just an accident.”

“Sorry.” He shook his head. “The inspector declared it arson.”

“Arson?” she echoed. “How?”

“Someone punctured the line that feeds your gas fireplace. The glass front probably kept it contained, so you didn’t notice the smell. When you lit the flame on your stove, that caused the ignition. Fortunately for you, you went upstairs before that happened. If you’d been in the kitchen—or, worse, the living room—when it flashed...”

He didn’t need to fill in the details. She got it.

“The arsonist probably hoped that the explosion would cover up any sign that the line had been tampered with. The inspector found it right away, though. I’m sure he talked to the chief last night and had an idea of what he was looking for. Did you have any surveillance on that side of your house that might provide an image of whoever did this?”

“No.” She avoided looking at Matthew. He’d wanted her to add cameras to cover all angles of her house’s exterior. She’d told him that was overkill and had stuck to just the ones on the front and back doors.

“That’s what I thought. Too bad. If this was done by a professional, though, they’d have been careful to conceal their identity anyway.”

“Did you talk with the local PD in Illinois?” Matthew asked.

“I called them after the shed collapse, just to feel them out, but the assassination of the mayor is still an open case, so they weren’t forthcoming, especially since I couldn’t make a definite connection. Arson, though, might change that. I’ll give them another call. The problem is that we still don’t have anything but supposition to tie this to Frank Smit.”

“Could you get anything out of them on whether Frank was a suspect in the mayor’s death?” Matthew asked.

“No, they were playing it close to the vest, but I’ll keep at it. Will you...?” Brendan gestured to Kinley. “I’ll ask the shift commander to increase patrols on your street, but we don’t have a huge department.”

“I’ll keep her safe,” Matthew said.

She wanted to shout that she was standing right there, but she could admit that she hadn’t done a great job of protecting herself. She’d be more cautious now, since she could no longer convince herself that these had been random accidents.

“Thanks,” Brendan said. “I’ll be in touch if I have new information. Call if you need anything, Kinley.”

For the rest of the day, Kinley felt as though she were walking on eggshells. Matthew prowled inside and outside, looking for ways to improve his home’s security, while Kinley tried to adjust to sharing the space with him and Anaya. She’d been there several times, but just for a short visit or a meal. Moving in, even temporarily, was different.

Matthew seemed to have a system in place for everything from unloading the dishwasher to brewing coffee. She quickly learned that there was a rotation for the laundry. She’d been allowed into her house briefly to grab a few items of clothing, but they smelled smoky, and she wanted to wash them. It was apparently sheets and towels day, though. Matthew accommodated her, but it gave her insight into the rigidly ordered life he attempted to live.

Caring for Anaya must have taught him a certain amount of flexibility, but she remembered him saying how important

structure was to him. So she didn't comment and tried to keep a smile on her face. He was doing her a kindness.

It was still a little frustrating after they had seemed so close in the night. She wanted to relive those moments... but reality kept hitting her like a torrential rain.

“Oh, God,” Kinley said, looking out the front window of Matthew’s house.

“What?” Instantly on alert, he rushed to her side. Did she see Smit out there? He was ready to take her to the ground with him when he caught sight of a blue sedan parked in front of Kinley’s house. A woman in a no-nonsense gray suit stood staring at the damaged structure, her lips pressed together. “Who’s that?”

“My contact at the adoption agency, Audrey Hager. I completely forgot that we had a home visit scheduled for this afternoon. This is catastrophic.” Kinley’s voice was small, and her shoulders slumped.

He’d noticed the tension in her in the two days since the fire. She’d gotten increasingly uptight, but then he hadn’t been a bundle of joy, either. He was well aware of that. He’d make it up to her later. For now, all he could think about was keeping her safe. He’d upped his home security and made regular patrols around their joint properties.

Kinley had helped by taking on some of Anaya’s care, which he appreciated, but it made him even more conscious of how tough it was going to be when he was alone on the base, with all the responsibilities of active duty along with a toddler at home. His life was messy, and he hated that.

“I’ve been so busy dealing with insurance and everything,” Kinley said. “I didn’t even think to call her.”

“I’m sure she’ll understand that you’ve been preoccupied.” What kind of woman was this Audrey Hager that had Kinley so nervous?

“We’ll see.” Kinley opened his front door and waved to the woman, who didn’t return the friendly gesture. “Here goes.” Kinley marched forward, and he kept pace with her, his eyes scanning the street for threats. He was grateful that Anaya was over at Mia and Kenton’s, playing with their girls, so he could give Kinley all his attention. She seemed to need it.

“I’m so sorry for not calling you,” Kinley said. “As you can see, I had a fire.”

“I noticed.” Ms. Hager’s tone wasn’t sympathetic. Shouldn’t she be showing some concern for Kinley’s well-being?

“I can see how this will be a problem for my application, but I’m working with my insurance company. As soon as the claim goes through, I’ll be hiring contractors to get the house restored.”

“Cause of the fire?” Ms. Hager’s tone was clipped.

Kinley glanced at Matthew. “It’s still under investigation, but the fire inspector believes it was arson.”

“Arson?” The woman’s eyes went wide. “Has someone targeted you? I can tell you that isn’t going to go over well. The environment you provide for a child has to be one hundred percent safe.”

“Of course, I understand that. I didn’t mean to be the victim of arson. It just happened.”

“Arson does not ‘just happen’ to most people.”

Ms. Hager was really starting to piss Matthew off. Did the woman not have a single caring bone in her body? He was about to ask her that when she continued her questions.

“Where are you living now?”

“My neighbor has been kind enough to take me in temporarily. This is Matthew Templeton.” Kinley made the introductions. Matthew noted that Ms. Hager’s hand was as cold as her heart appeared to be. But he held his tongue.

“Please, come into my house so you and Kinley can talk,” he invited. She looked like she might refuse, but she grabbed a briefcase from her sedan and marched up the walk to his door.

“Do you own this home, Mr. Templeton?” she asked as soon as they were inside.

“I’m renting it for the time I’m living in Hartsville.”

“And how long is that?”

“Not much longer. I’m returning to my base soon. I’m a Navy SEAL.”

“You have a child?” She indicated the basket of toys near the coffee table.

“I have custody of my niece.” That was as much answer as he was going to give. His circumstances weren’t on trial here. And neither were Kinley’s.

Ms. Hager turned her attention back to Kinley. “Where will you go when Mr. Templeton is no longer living here?”

“I haven’t worked that out yet,” Kinley said. “I’m not sure how long the repairs on my house will take. I’ll probably rent a house or apartment once I know. Don’t worry—I’ll update my application with my new address.”

“I don’t like the idea of a baby going home to a temporary residence.” Ms. Hager opened her bag and pulled out a laptop. “What is the nature of your relationship with Mr. Templeton? Is he your boyfriend? In my experience, people don’t offer shelter to casual acquaintances.”

If Matthew lived near Ms. Hager, he’d cross the street to avoid talking to her. Allowing her to live with him—fat chance.

“We’re... friends.” Kinley didn’t mention that he had been her patient, and he wasn’t going to bring it up. But it did leave him questioning what they were. Friends of a sort. Lovers. He liked having her in his bed, being able to turn to her in the night. She was safe there, and that was important to him. It was more than that, though. He cared for her, but their situation wasn’t an easy one.

And he didn't need anyone, especially this woman, questioning it. "I think you're avoiding the real issue, Ms. Hager," he said.

"And what's that?" She pinned him with a look, but he'd faced down tougher opponents. He didn't so much as blink.

"You've failed to help Kinley succeed in adopting a child." He heard Kinley's gasp, but he kept going. "For instance, you, as the professional in this arena, should have realized that her original personal profile wasn't what it needed to be."

"That's up to the client—"

"But you should have advised Kinley on how to make her profile stronger, more suitable." He wasn't backing down on this.

"I wouldn't want anyone to misrepresent themselves."

Okay, now he was boiling. Kinley hadn't misrepresented herself. He lowered his voice. "Do you have any idea how amazing she is? What an awesome mom she'll be? I've seen her with my two-year-old niece. She *gets* kids. She knows how to talk with them, and she loves them."

No matter what happened between him and Kinley, he wouldn't forget how she and Anaya interacted. And it hadn't been once here or there. It was constant. They'd played in her garden, done crafts and cooked together, and for the past two nights, Kinley had been the one to tuck her into bed. She had what it took to be a mother.

"The application has to tell the prospective parent's qualifications. It's not up to me to elaborate on that."

"It ought to be. You deal with women who are pregnant and facing a tough choice. They're looking for guidance, which you should give them. You should have been singing Kinley's praises and setting up an adoption that would have been in the best interests of a child. Any kid adopted by Kinley is going to have a great life and future."

Maybe it wasn't his place, but he felt the need to stand up for Kinley. After that first shocked gasp, she'd remained silent, her face pale.

“Well. I am not accustomed to being lectured in this way, especially by someone with no true stake in the adoption.”

A full minute of tense silence followed. Had he overstepped? Probably. But he wasn't taking back what he said or offering an apology.

Kinley finally spoke up. “What do I need to do, Ms. Hager? I want the best chance at this adoption, but I realize my situation is less than ideal at the moment. I'm looking for advice here.”

“To be frank, you need to reestablish stability in your life. Between your house and your... relationship with Mr. Templeton, you don't seem as appropriate a placement as you once did.”

“So there's no possibility that the adoption we spoke of will go through?” Kinley asked.

He knew it was ripping her apart to put that into words. He wanted to offer her comfort, but she suddenly seemed too distant.

“That is up to the birth mother. I'm saying it doesn't look good for you.” Ms. Hager snapped her laptop shut—Matthew wasn't sure why she'd pulled it out, since she hadn't used it—and shoved it into her bag. “Let me know when you have a new address, and we'll go from there.”

Kinley walked her to the door and wished her a safe drive.

“I'm sorry, Kinley,” he said as soon as the door was closed. He wanted to hug her, but she was sending out back-off vibes. “I couldn't stay silent when I heard how that woman was treating you. I meant what I said. You'll be a fantastic mom. Let me write a letter recommending you to birth mothers. They need to see you, not what you look like on an application.”

“Don't write a letter.” She held up a hand. “Just stay out of it. Please.”

“I have to do *something*. You don't deserve the way you've been jerked around by that adoption agency.”

“What do I deserve?” she demanded. “A burned-out house? A damaged car? To be living in fear?” She swiped away tears.

He couldn't tell if they were tears of sadness or frustration. Maybe both.

"None of those," he said. He silently wondered if he was somewhere on her list of problems. He didn't want to think so, but living together, even these few days, had been tougher than he'd have imagined. He had a certain way of doing things. He lived with boundaries, and he knew that was best for him. Anaya had blown some of those apart, but he was working to rebuild his life in a way that accommodated her.

Having another person in the small house had made him aware of how constricting those rules could seem to someone else. Kinley had been a model guest, but he could see how he'd made her uncomfortable more than once, both with his rigid housekeeping and his overprotectiveness. And yet he couldn't seem to help either one. He needed the order and structure—and when it came to Kinley, no amount of safety precautions felt like enough. He wouldn't be concerned if he were the one in peril. He had the training and experience to handle it. Kinley didn't, and it was up to him to protect her. Maybe he couldn't manage being her lover and her protector at the same time, on top of being a full-time father.

His SEAL buddies had been in similar situations and succeeded. They'd also ended up with the women staying in their lives permanently. That wasn't what he was looking for. Was it? He shook his head. He just couldn't see how it could work for him and Kinley. He'd always thought he was meant to be alone. It was familiar and easier. Safer. That hadn't changed.

"I'm going to go work in my garden," she said into the silence that had fallen between them. "I need some time to myself."

"Don't—" He was instantly worried that she might come under attack.

"I'll be in my yard," she declared, making it clear that this wasn't open for discussion. "I'll be fine. You must have something you need to do." She didn't add, "without me," but that was the sense of her words. She was probably right. They both needed some space.

Kinley was glad to go to her office the next day and have some normalcy—and even happier that some of Matthew’s friends dropped by after dinner so their kids could play with Anaya. It was a welcome change, since things were tense between her and Matthew. And she found she liked his SEAL friends Kenton and Anderson and their wives. She already knew Mia and her girls, and she was happy to meet Violet and her son, Nate. The men went out to the backyard to drink a beer, so the women chatted in the living room while the kids played on the floor nearby.

Kinley felt a bit awkward at first. It wasn’t her house or her position to play hostess. But the other two women soon pulled her into conversation. They really couldn’t be more different from each other—Mia was a free spirit who worked in a bakery, while Violet had traveled the world as an analyst employed by a government agency—but it all seemed to gel.

“Kenton would be devastated by a house fire,” Mia confided. “When he heard about yours, before he knew it was arson, he’d already reviewed fire safety procedures with the girls and run tests on the smoke detectors. He tends to be a little by the book.”

Violet laughed at that. “He may have written the book,” she said. “Anderson and I did have a conversation with Nate about what to do in an emergency, though. He’s not too young to understand that. I just don’t want to frighten him.”

“It’s a good thing I live alone,” Kinley said. “I didn’t need to worry about getting anyone else out.” Not that she’d gotten herself out. She would have, given another minute to think about it, but Matthew had rushed in.

“No pets, either?” Mia asked.

“I work long hours, but I do want a cat or a dog eventually.” She didn’t add that she wanted her child, if and when she got one, to have a pet. She’d been denied that as a kid. Her parents had come up with innumerable reasons why she couldn’t have one, but she’d longed for the unconditional love an animal can give.

“We have a puppy, and he’s a... challenge.” Violet sighed. “Anderson wanted to be around to train him, but, of course, he was required to report the week we got Rocky. So it was all me at first.”

From what Matthew had told Kinley, Anderson was on the same SEAL team as Kenton—and Patrick, whom she had yet to meet. Then there were the guys from Matthew’s team. She’d met Garrett briefly in the driveway when he picked Matthew up to go to their base. Jonathan was supposed to come for a visit, but it had gotten put off more than once. She didn’t try to understand the intricacies of the military world they navigated. Talking to the women who loved them might give her some insight, but she wasn’t going to present herself as anything but Matthew’s neighbor.

“You love being in control of puppydom,” Mia said with a grin, reminding Kinley that they were talking about pets, not men.

“I kinda do,” Violet agreed. “Rocky is ridiculously lovable, and Nate is thrilled. A boy and his dog, you know.”

Kinley’s heart ached, though she tried to keep smiling. She wanted so badly to have a child of her own, a child she could take to an animal shelter to pick out a beloved pet and bring it home to a house filled with love and laughter.

“What do you suppose they’re so deep in conversation about?” Mia asked. Through the glass slider, they could see the three

men standing together on the deck.

Matthew's face was serious, but it was always serious now. Before the fire, he'd had some wonderful, lighthearted moments. She missed those.

"Who knows?" Violet responded as her husband put his hand on Matthew's shoulder and gave it a squeeze, like he was offering comfort. "Maybe the mission, still."

"The one Matthew's hand was injured on? I take it that's an ongoing problem," Kinley said.

"I don't know the details," Mia said. "The guys keep that to themselves, but one of their close friends was killed. It's been tough for all of them."

Matthew had implied as much. Other than that, all she knew was how Matthew's injury was sustained. Something about a bomb and a compound in Colombia. She didn't want to know more. Not really. She didn't like to think about what could have happened to Matthew.

"Uh-oh," Mia said with a look at the kids. "I see yawns."

"Getting close to bedtime," Violet agreed. "Time to say our goodbyes, Nate." She gave her husband a little wave through the glass to get his attention and pointed to her watch.

They all left shortly after that, and thirty minutes later, Kinley had put Anaya to bed. It was getting to be a habit, one that she enjoyed. She liked the ritual of bath, story, and bed. She'd like it more if Matthew did it with her. But, as she'd had to explain to Anaya three times when she asked where he was, Matthew was busy. Personally, she thought his nightly security checks could wait, but he always did them just at twilight, for reasons she didn't understand.

"She's waiting for a kiss," Kinley said as she entered the kitchen.

Matthew was sitting at the table with his laptop open. "Thanks for getting her ready."

"Not a problem."

When he left the room, Kinley made herself a cup of decaf. She'd snuck into her house and snagged her Keurig machine from the kitchen. That way she could have the flavored coffee she preferred and not interfere with Matthew's need for super strong, plain black coffee.

She brewed a cup and sat down at the table with her phone to check messages. Her eyes traveled to the web page Matthew had been looking at: a site for a nanny service. Ah, so he was dealing with that. It needed to be done, though her heart went out to Anaya. She loved her uncle and would be devastated at being left for long periods while he was deployed.

If he could be deployed. Kinley's final assessment of Matthew's hand suggested that his days as a bomb expert were over, even though he believed differently. Sometimes belief played a huge part in recovery, but it could only do so much. She'd been honest with him about that throughout his therapy. Now it was up to the army specialists to decide his fate.

In any case, he was preparing for active duty. He came back and sat next to her.

"Any luck?" she asked, nodding toward the screen.

"I've got her enrolled at the base's day care center, but that's only going to solve part of my problem. The paperwork for full-time care is complicated. And getting this right is important to me. I want her to have the structure and support that I didn't have growing up."

He'd mentioned before his need for the order that the Navy imposed. It had helped him out of a difficult youth... but did he still need it? Was that the best thing for Anaya? Kinley couldn't imagine it was. The girl needed his love and attention more than anything. But he was so concerned about playing by the book. He seemed afraid his world would fall apart if he didn't.

Something occurred to her. Hadn't he chided her for doing the same thing? She sat back, letting her coffee cool on the table while she thought about that. Could she bring it up to him? Why not, she decided.

“Weren’t you the one encouraging me to be myself on the adoption application and not get so hung up on doing everything exactly right?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“So... maybe you don’t need to follow the structure and rules as much as you think you do. What if, instead of worrying about every single detail, you fill out the paperwork as best you can and leave it at that?”

“If the paperwork isn’t complete, I won’t be considered for a nanny,” he said. She gave it a minute and let him think about his response. “All right, I see what you’re saying. But this really is different. I can’t afford to leave anything incomplete.”

“And I can?” Her problem had been too much information, not too little, but the point was the same.

“You can, because you’re just about the most perfect woman I’ve ever met.” He grinned at her for the first time in two days, and she laughed.

“No one is perfect.”

“You sure about that?” he asked as he closed his laptop and turned to her.

She wasn’t sure whether she should take his comment as a compliment or criticism. What had she once read about people with beautiful faces? People couldn’t describe them later, because flaws are what make faces interesting and memorable.

She didn’t aspire to be perfect. She had flaws, and she was glad of that. Her parents had tried to make her their vision of perfection, but she’d eventually learned to resist their efforts. She was glad of that, too. It was what made her an individual.

“As sure as I can be about anything,” she said. “I don’t want you or anyone else thinking I’m more than I am.”

“Too late.” His voice had softened, and he reached for her hand, raising it to his lips and kissing her palm. “Do you want me to prove it?”

“How can you prove that?” she countered, but her heart rate was picking up.

“Come to bed with me.”

“It’s early.” She gave him a prim smile.

“We’re not going to sleep.” He pulled her to her feet. “Not for a while.”

She considered resisting, but bed was the one place where they were completely in sync. The tension of being under threat, the worry about her adoption chances, the questions about what they were to each other faded away every night when he loved her.

“This isn’t about either of us being perfect.” She wanted to be clear on that.

He shook his head and framed her face with his large hands. “When I look at you, that’s what I see. Let me show you that, Kinley.”

Fleetingly, she wondered what he saw. He’d come closer than anyone to seeing her for who she was—or so she’d thought. But if he’d been seeing perfection, he hadn’t truly seen her at all.

Still, she let him lead her into his bedroom, because perfect or not, it felt good to be with him. She stepped away from him and peeled off the sundress she’d been wearing. It had a built-in bra, so she was down to white lace panties in no time. He came to her and rested his hands on her waist.

“See? Perfect.”

She was in good shape. She exercised and ate well, but no human body was perfect. “I have scars.”

“Where?” He pretended to inspect her.

“My knee. You must have seen it.” She’d had surgery as a senior in high school to deal with a sports injury. She pointed to the incision.

“Never noticed it.” He had scars on his hand from his recent mission and others scattered on his torso and legs. He’d shrugged off her questions when she’d asked about them.

“Now you have. Take me off the perfect list.” She was half-teasing, half-serious.

“Nope.”

She sighed. “I’m not going to win this, am I?”

“Nope,” he repeated. He took her breasts in his hands, caressing them. “Stop trying.”

So she did, and turned her attention to proving how perfect they were *together* when making love. She undid the button on his jeans and slid the zipper down over the bulge of his arousal.

“Take these off,” she said, giving them a push down his hips. He stepped out of them. “And those.” She indicated his boxer briefs.

“What about yours?” His fingers slid along the elastic of her panties.

“You first,” she said and almost licked her lips when he obeyed. He was so hard, and she loved that she could make him that way. He reached for her hand, guiding it to his dick. With his hand over hers, they stroked his length together. His head fell back, pure enjoyment on his face.

“Tell me that’s not perfect,” he rasped.

“It’s hot.”

He chuckled. “Okay. Perfect and hot as hell.” A bead of moisture appeared at the tip of his dick, and she had to taste it. She dropped to her knees on the soft rug and ran her tongue over him. His hands balled into fists at his sides. “Do that again. Please.” His voice was no more than a growl. She licked him again before taking all of him into her mouth. His body was tense with need, almost trembling, which made her suck harder. “Can’t let myself come like this.”

His hands were in her hair, pulling her away. He held her there as he dragged in deep breaths, struggling for control. She couldn’t help her smile of satisfaction.

“I’m going to return that favor.”

She slipped off her panties, making sure to add some wiggle before stretching out on the bed, her legs parted. "Please."

He shuddered out a breath and came to her, propping a hand on either side of her body. The kiss he started with was devastating, hot and needy, but not long enough. He moved down to lavish attention on her nipples before dragging his tongue across her stomach. The first touch on her clit was a mere flick, tantalizing her and making her clutch the sheets. Next he delved between her folds in long strokes that drove her wild.

"I love how wet you are," he murmured before sucking on her. "So amazing."

"Don't say perfect." She could hardly speak loud enough to be heard, what with the sensations that were rippling through her. She whimpered when he kissed the insides of her thighs and drew away. She heard a drawer open and the crinkle of the condom package.

"You make any control I have slip, Kinley." He returned to her, waiting only a heartbeat, just long enough for their eyes to meet, before thrusting into her. As he filled her, she fleetingly thought about their connection that went beyond being neighbors, friends, or even lovers.

She couldn't think about what it meant then. Later, she would. For now, she clung to him and rode out their pleasure. After they'd both finished, he left her for only a minute to dispose of the condom before returning to tuck her under the sheets with him. She was already drifting, close to sleep.

"You can't say that was anything but perfect," he said and kissed her softly.

She wanted to argue, but she was too overwhelmed by what had happened between them to put her thoughts into words.

Matthew had dropped Anaya at day care, even though he had no specific plans for the day. She had asked to go since she'd made friends there. And, he figured, it wasn't a bad idea to keep her used to going to day care. It might make her eventual transition to the base childcare center easier. It also made it easier to get some errands done.

He could move back on base anytime, but he wouldn't leave Kinley without protection. Smit was still a threat, which had Matthew climbing the walls. He wanted to push this to some kind of conclusion. Waiting around for Smit to attack again was killing him. But the guy was in the wind. Brendan had called to say that Smit had turned in the keys to his rental in town on the day of the arson, which was six long damn days ago. No one knew where he was now.

Matthew checked his property and Kinley's, looking for anything that seemed off, but he saw nothing. He stopped at the gate that separated their yards, stilling his body and opening his mind. On a mission, if there was a lull like this, what would the team do?

That was easy. Recon. They'd gather more information and do a risk assessment. That was the path he needed to take. And he knew the person who could help him. With Kinley safely at her clinic, Matthew drove to the police station and asked for Brendan Hogue.

"Paperwork day," Brendan said after bringing Matthew to his small office and inviting him to sit. The desk was covered with

files. “I put it off, but eventually it catches up to me.”

“Closed cases, or current?”

“Some of both. Most of them aren’t too exciting. Graffiti in the park, phone scam complaints, a hit-and-run that turned out to be a teenager who had borrowed Grandpa’s car and didn’t realize how fast it would accelerate. That’s not what you’re here for, though.” Brendan reached into a drawer and pulled out a green bucket file. “I keep my special projects in a different place.” He flipped through the file and selected several manila folders. “These are the reports on Kinley’s car accident and fire.” He placed those on the desk near Matthew. “Here’s my research on Frank Smit.”

Matthew took the loose papers from the detective.

“We still don’t have anything to tie Smit to the attacks on Kinley. Arson is a big deal, but there’s not a shred of evidence linking him to the fire. I’ve been flying under the radar and gathering as much intel as I can. I’ve been over and over it, but maybe fresh eyes will help. Take a look.”

Matthew set aside the folders about the car accident and arson to focus on what Brendan had found out about Smit. He gave the papers a scan and then went back through and read more carefully. He was disappointed when he finally looked up. “Not much to go on.” He’d wanted more.

“I think that speaks volumes,” Brendan said. “I tracked down two aliases, but whatever name you search, there’s not much out there. If he really is a mob hit man, that tells you he’s good. He’s not leaving a trail. He’s not flashy.”

“Quiet and patient.” That wasn’t reassuring, since it meant that Smit was probably waiting out the situation here as well, looking for his opportunity to strike.

“The biggest ripple he’s ever made is the hit on the mayor. He was nearly caught there. An eyewitness gave a description that could well be Smit.”

“Assuming the injuries Kinley was treating him for match what’s known of the shooting and the gunman’s escape, though, they might be harder to dismiss,” Matthew said.

“Yeah. With Kinley’s testimony, the evidence would start to mount against him. She’d be highly credible on the stand, with her status as a therapist and her knowledge of his injuries.”

“If we can see that, so can Smit. He’s not going to leave her alone. Not in the long run.”

“Agreed,” the detective said. “I wish I knew where he was now.”

“Let’s try to predict his actions based on what we know. He’s tried three ‘accidents’ that haven’t been successful. What does a hit man do in that case?”

“Go back to what he knows.”

“Guns,” Matthew said. “But since Kinley was treating him, it seems likely he sustained an injury to his hand.” He was all too aware those could have lasting consequences. “Can he fire one accurately?”

“Kinley would know the answer to that best.”

“She hasn’t told me anything confidential about Smit, but I imagine the rules for cooperating with law enforcement are different.”

Brendan nodded. “They are.”

“Great. I’ll text her to stop by when she’s done with patients for the day.” He sent a quick message and went back to studying the case file that Brendan had built. Smit had always been discreet and cautious, but this situation wasn’t a job he was hired for. It was personal. Kinley could put him in prison.

So, how desperate would Smit get? Would he risk going after her in public, regardless of the collateral damage? Or was he waiting for an opportunity to ambush her? And what means of attack would he favor?

Matthew was still pondering those questions when Brendan got word Kinley had arrived. The detective departed briefly to escort her to his office. Matthew had seen Kinley that morning, but his heart still kicked up a notch when she walked in. She was wearing the same bright blue shirt as she had the first day they’d met. She’d caught his attention that day, and

nothing about that had changed. Just being in the room with her made him want to hold her. Yeah, it was partly his protective instinct, but there was more to it than that. He just didn't know what, or what to do about it.

"You guys wanted to see me?"

"Did you walk here?" Matthew asked.

"Beth dropped me off. I'm being cautious," she assured him, sounding a bit irritated by his question. Too bad.

"Have a seat." Brendan pushed another chair up to his desk.

"We want to talk with you about Smit's physical limitations."

Her lips pressed together. "You know I can't speak to that."

"I recognize that you have legal and professional obligations to your patients," Brendan said. "But there are HIPAA exceptions for law enforcement, and one of them says you can provide certain information, including type of injury, to help identify or locate a suspect."

Matthew couldn't read her expression. She should be happy that the law allowed her to help them find Frank, but she seemed less eager than he'd have expected.

After a pause, though, she said, "Okay. What do you want to know about Frank's injuries?"

"Could he fire a gun?" Brendan asked.

She thought about that. "Technically, yes. His right index finger, which I assume would be his trigger finger, doesn't always do what he wants it to. The connection between the command and the result isn't fully in sync. But with sufficient concentration, he could pull a trigger."

"With accuracy?" Matthew asked.

"Accuracy would probably be impaired. The last time I saw him, we were working to correct a tendency to pull to the left. Unless he's received additional therapy since then, I doubt that has improved."

That was somewhat reassuring, Matthew thought. "What about other injuries?"

Kinley paused before answering, “He’s recovering from two broken legs, though that’s not what I was seeing him for. He’d been making good progress in that regard and is back to being ambulatory. Well, you know that—you saw him at my office that day.”

That seemed to be the extent of the information Kinley felt comfortable providing, and after Matthew thanked Brendan for letting him go through the files, he and Kinley headed for his truck. His mind was working over the intel he’d gathered, and he didn’t like the conclusion. He felt sure an attack was imminent, so he had to keep Kinley closer than he had—and he had to ensure other innocents were safely out of the crossfire.

“I’m going to ask Kenton and Mia to keep Anaya at their house for a while,” he said.

“Why? Oh.” Kinley quickly answered her own question. “I’m sorry, Matthew. I never meant for any of this to happen. Will it upset her to go? Maybe I should leave instead. I could get a hotel room.”

“No.” No way in hell was she going out on her own. Besides, Anaya would see this as a fun sleepover with Emma and Ava. It was also good practice for her being separated from him, he supposed. The time was coming when he’d be back out on a mission. They both might as well get used to it.

Matthew made a quick call to Mia to ask the favor, which she was happy to do. They stopped at the house to pack a bag for Anaya, and then they took her straight from day care to Mia’s. As he’d expected, Anaya was excited to be with her friends. He hoped that lasted. And, in one more piece of good luck, when he and Kinley arrived home, Jonathan’s vehicle was parked in the driveway. Apparently this visit hadn’t gotten derailed like the last ones had. Matthew was beyond relieved to have an extra set of very capable eyes and hands around.

He introduced Kinley to Jonathan, and they all made dinner together. Afterward, he and Jonathan went out to the patio to talk. He laid out his security concerns and filled in any details that Jonathan didn’t already know.

Matthew felt he'd done everything he could. He'd gotten Anaya to safety, and between him and Jonathan, they could protect Kinley. He went to the bedroom feeling calmer than he had all day. The situation was as under control as it could be.

He found Kinley curled up in an armchair, reading a book. She tossed it aside when he entered but didn't make any move to rise. She'd been quiet since they left the police station. The tension was probably getting to her.

"Thought you'd be asleep," he said. He'd been looking forward to crawling in next to her and waking her up. In bed, they didn't have the communication problems that plagued them elsewhere. Whatever gaps kept them apart during the day seemed bridged at night when he held her.

"I tried."

"You need to rest," he advised. "I know you're worried, but with Jonathan here, we'll be able to run a better security detail. I promise you'll be safe until Smit's been dealt with."

"That's not what's keeping me up." She studied his face before speaking. "I want to know what happens after that. What happens to us?"

"Us?" he said, not following her train of thought.

"Yes. Us." She seemed exhausted, but her eyes were bright. "Or is this just circumstances and sex?"

It wasn't. Not to him. But he also hadn't worked out any kind of future for them. He'd been too busy trying to make sure she survived to *have* a future.

"Have you considered staying in Hartsville?" she asked when he didn't answer her question. "Maybe becoming a detective, like Brendan? You'd be great at that."

Whoa... wait. She was thinking several pages further on in the book than he was. Had this come up because they'd been together at the station that afternoon? Or was it inevitable that this moment would arrive? Either way, it was some lousy-ass timing.

“I’m not leaving the SEALs.” The Navy was everything to him. It had shaped him into who he was, and he loved his work. “Why would you even suggest that? You keep going to your office when it’s probably not the safest place for you right now—and I’ve supported you, because I know it’s what you want. I haven’t asked you to change, even temporarily. Much less something as big as my career.”

Her legs uncurled and her feet hit the floor flat. “You pushed me to change my adoption profile.”

“That was a good thing. You got interest then.” He’d helped her there, right?

“I got an email tonight.” She stood, facing him. “The mother who was considering me has selected someone else.”

He got where she was coming from now, and he hated that she was hurting. “I’m sorry, Kinley, but there’ll be other babies.”

“That’s what I’ve been telling myself for two years.” She swiped away a tear. “It doesn’t help. After what you said to Ms. Hager and the conclusions she drew about me, I’ll be lucky if the adoption agency doesn’t drop me cold.” She took in a shaky breath. “When that happens, I’ll regroup and focus my hopes elsewhere, I guess. You need to do the same.”

“What do you mean by that?” he demanded.

“Oh, Matthew, you’re too smart to deny the truth for long. You’ve convinced yourself that you’re going to return to defusing bombs, but you’re not. We both know you’re not. You’ll never regain the dexterity and fine motor control to do it safely.”

He hated that she used the word *never*. It was a hundred times worse than *unlikely*. “Did you put that in your final report on me?” He hadn’t seen the document she’d sent to the military hospital. How damning had it been?

“Not in so many words. I couldn’t do that to you, because...” She shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. They’ll see it for themselves.” She made that outcome sound inevitable, but it wasn’t. He would work hard, harder than he ever had, and beat the odds. “You need to think about your future differently,

Matthew. If you don't, you're going to be terribly disappointed. Think ahead. Plan for change now."

"No." He couldn't, and he wouldn't. His path in life had been clear since that day standing next to his high school principal at the recruiting station. That wasn't going to change. His hand would recover, and he'd find a way to manage Anaya's care for when he was deployed.

"Okay, then," she said a long minute later, when he hadn't added to his one-word response. "So I need to take the next step for myself. And that's away from you. I don't want to be around when reality hits."

"You can't leave. Smit's still out there." He didn't miss her message that she was done with him on a personal level, but he'd committed to protecting her. That wasn't changing.

"I won't leave until this is over," she said. "But *we* are done."

"Just like that?" His voice was steady, even a little hard. Inside, he was reeling, but he wasn't going to let her see that.

"I'm afraid so. We're not good for each other, Matthew. Not the way things are now."

This shouldn't be a shock. He'd never seen anything for them beyond his time in Hartsville, after all. Her life was here, and his wasn't. Still, he'd come to care for her.

"I'll sleep in Anaya's room from now on."

"No, you stay in here. I'll bunk on the couch."

She shook her head. "It's your house."

Within a few minutes, she gathered the few belongings she'd brought over from her fire-ravaged house and silently slipped out the bedroom door.

Only then did he sit on the edge of the bed and let himself wonder just what in hell had happened. Ending things between them was for the best—he got that—but the intensity of the ache in his chest surprised him.

Kinley wandered Matthew's house, restless and anxious. She wanted to be out in her garden, working out her frantic energy by yanking weeds and cutting back spent blossoms. She'd even take spreading mulch, her least favorite garden task, over the horrible tension that had permeated the past two days. But she'd been forbidden to be outside other than the few seconds it took to get in or out of a vehicle as she went back and forth to work.

Evenings were the worst. She felt trapped. She *was* trapped. Since she'd moved out of Matthew's bedroom, they'd been no more than cordial to each other, exchanging the few words necessary to live in the same small space. Over dinner, Matthew and Jonathan had talked some, but then Matthew went to Kenton and Mia's to see Anaya and settle her for the night. It sounded as if, despite enjoying being with her friends, the girl was struggling with the prolonged separation from him.

Kinley knew how that felt. It was breaking her heart that she and Matthew were through. She hadn't wanted to give up on him, but she was afraid he was setting himself up for a fall.

Not for a minute did she think she had all the answers, but she was good at accepting a situation for what it was. He wasn't doing that about his future, and that would only hurt him in the end. She slumped down on the couch and picked up one of Matthew's ever-present crossword puzzle books. She flipped to the one he was working on. Most of it was filled in. She focused on the few clues left.

Seven-letter word for someone who sees things as they are. Easy—and ironic. *Realist*.

Eight-letter word for a frequently fractured wrist bone. Not a challenge. *Scaphoid*.

This wasn't doing it for her.

"How about a game of cards? Helps pass the time," Jonathan suggested when he came in from doing his security check.

"Sure." She tossed the book aside. "What's your game?"

"We'll keep it simple. How about rummy?"

"Works for me." She got a deck of cards from a drawer and shuffled. They played the first hand while talking about random things. It was comfortable, and she found herself relaxing. He was easy to talk to, and she was curious about him. "What's your story? Always wanted to be a SEAL?"

"Yeah, but..." He dealt the cards.

"What?" she asked softly.

"I wouldn't trade it, but being a SEAL requires sacrifices." He gave a shrug. "I guess no one gets through life without regrets."

"Who was she?" Somehow, Kinley knew he was talking about a woman.

Jonathan shot her a look. "She's a DEA agent now, but we dated when we were in the Naval Academy."

"You loved each other?"

"I don't know about that. I guess you could say we didn't get that far."

"Because you left?" SEALs must be drawn to duty, willing to set everything else aside for the sake of the mission. Although she wondered whether that was true for all of them. Some of Matthew's SEAL buddies seemed to put their families first.

"We had different goals back then and went our separate ways," Jonathan said. "I've seen her again recently, though, since she's investigating what went wrong in Colombia."

Kinley didn't think she was getting the full story. "That must be odd for you."

"The whole damn thing's been a shitshow." His eyes were shadowed. "Matthew probably told you I was the team leader. Hell of a leader I turned out to be. One SEAL killed. Others, including Matthew, injured."

"You couldn't have predicted what would happen."

"That may be true. But someone else might have made a different call that would have led to a better outcome." An alarm on Jonathan's phone sounded and he checked it. "An exterior camera's out. It probably just needs a reset... but stay inside, away from the windows, until I get back. Better safe than sorry." He removed a gun from a safe in the closet that she didn't remember seeing before and headed out the door.

She sat back on the couch, thinking about Jonathan's story. It gave her some insight into the way Matthew thought. They were both warriors, willing to give up everything else to fulfill their mission and support their team. Jonathan had given up a woman who obviously meant something to him. He and Matthew were driven by what they did, and she was grateful that people like them existed in the world. But that didn't mean they should deny themselves a life.

She closed her eyes for a moment and let her imagination go. What if there were a way she and Matthew could have a true relationship? It would take work and compromise, but didn't all relationships require that?

Had she given up on Matthew too easily? She winced when she thought about what she'd said to him in the bedroom. Had she been merely trying to protect herself by declaring it over between them? Matthew had been inflexible, but she hadn't given him much of a chance. Had she made a terrible mistake?

She suddenly became aware that Jonathan had been gone too long. She was on her feet and halfway to the door to search for him when she stopped herself. That would be foolish. She should call Matthew. She reached for her phone.

"What's wrong?" he answered without a greeting.

It pained her that he thought she'd only call if there was a problem. But, of course, that *was* why she was calling. "Maybe nothing. Jonathan went outside to fix a camera, but that was several minutes ago. Should I go look for him?"

"*No*," he said, his tone becoming even sharper. "I'm already on my way home. Go into my bedroom and lock the door. Do it now."

"Okay." She hung up, then thought, too late, that she should have kept him on the line. Should she call him back? Before she could do that or go to the bedroom, she heard shattering glass. The slider that led to the patio cracked into pieces as Frank Smit hammered it with the butt of his gun.

It was too late to hide. All she could do was hope Matthew hurried. And what had happened to Jonathan? Was he injured? Dead? Oh, God. This was all her fault. She put the brakes on that train of thought, since the guilt belonged to the man holding a gun on her. And that pissed her off enough to push away the fear.

"Frank." She kept her tone flat.

"Dr. James. Turns out you're a hard woman to get rid of." He held his gun steady in his right hand.

"You've kept trying anyway."

"Had to. I couldn't have you talking about what you'd overheard."

"So it's true. You're a killer." She had no idea where the calm she was exuding at that moment came from. Maybe from her training on how to soothe a patient. Whatever the source, she had to keep it up until Matthew arrived.

Frank shrugged. "It's a job."

"But targeting me is personal."

"Sorry, Doc. I didn't want to. You're good at what you do, and I like you. But... you know," he said. She *didn't* know, since she'd never been tempted to take a human life for any reason. "Does make it tougher to shoot you," he admitted.

“So you tried accidents and arson first?” How long did she have before he killed her? Was it enough time for Matthew to arrive?

“I thought the brake thing and the shed collapse would be less obvious. But neither was foolproof. Gas explosion, though, that usually does the trick. Since it didn’t, I gotta do it this way. Sorry.” He gestured with the gun. A line of sweat broke out on her back, and her hands trembled.

Hands. That might be the ticket. Frank’s aim was likely to pull to the left. If his first shot missed, would it give her enough time to get out of the house? She didn’t know anything about guns, but she knew about hands. Even if the gun was capable of firing again right away, Frank’s muscles wouldn’t respond quickly... she hoped.

“Get it over with, then,” she said, drawing on all her courage. In her head, she was already plotting her course past him, to the broken slider.

A tremor went through his hand as he raised it, taking aim. Seconds ticked by while she watched his muscles tighten and the concentration it took for him to pull the trigger. When she saw all the necessary elements come together, she leaped to the side. An explosion of sound filled the room, but she was already running.

“God dammit,” Frank yelled as she crashed through the slider.

She felt a jagged piece of glass slice her arm, but she didn’t slow down. She sprinted the length of Matthew’s yard. As she vaulted the rear fence, another bullet ripped through the quiet of the night. She kept running, making for the trees behind the property where she could hide.

Heavy footsteps pursued her, but she was far more nimble. She sent a silent word of thanks to her parents for all those years of dance classes and soccer leagues. But she couldn’t run forever. She needed a place to hide. In the dim light, she made out the shape of a gnarled, overgrown apple tree.

Her leggings and T-shirt were dark. If she could get up among the leaves, Frank might not see her. And it would give her the

high ground. She pulled herself up on the lowest limb and climbed as noiselessly as she could.

“Kinley!” Matthew’s voice carried, but she didn’t dare respond and give away her location. Frank was somewhere below, searching for her.

She hunkered down, waiting, her stomach doing flips. Adrenaline was racing through her, but she forced herself to stay still. She didn’t know how much time had passed when she heard Frank’s footsteps. He was pausing every few feet to look around. She looked down and saw the gleam of the gun in his hand.

Move on, she wished silently.

All her senses were on high alert, or she wouldn’t have heard the whisper of another set of steps nearby. Matthew. He’d know how to move silently. She strained her eyes to see.

“Put your gun down, Smit. The police are on their way. This is over.” Matthew’s voice rang clearly in the still night.

Just then, Frank stopped directly below her location. His gun was raised, pointing in the direction of Matthew’s voice. She couldn’t let him shoot. His aim might be off, but she wasn’t going to risk Matthew’s life. She needed a distraction.

Young apples sprouted on the tree, and she snatched two and threw them so they hit the ground in the opposite direction from where Matthew had been. Frank turned and fired at the sound. He must have realized the bullet didn’t strike anyone, because he pivoted back, his gun still raised.

She was scrambling for more apples when a shot rang out and Frank crumpled to the ground. Matthew strode forward, kicking the hit man’s gun away, and leaned down to press his hand to Frank’s throat, checking for a pulse.

“Kinley?” Matthew called a moment later, his face turned up to the branches over his head. He’d pinpointed her location.

“Is he...?” she asked.

“He’s dead. It’s safe to come down.”

She worked her way back to the center of the tree and climbed down. Matthew's hands went around her waist, lifting her before she could make the last jump to the ground. She turned to face him, her arms going around his neck. She buried her face against his chest, needing his strength and comfort. He held her close, neither of them speaking for long minutes.

Finally, she pushed back. "How did you know where I was?"

"Jonathan saw you run for the woods. Smit got in a lucky hit, whacked him hard on the head when they were wrestling, so he couldn't give chase—but he wasn't knocked out completely."

"Is Jonathan okay?" she asked as she heard police sirens in the distance.

"He will be."

"Thank goodness for that."

"You're hurt?" His hand was on her upper arm where the glass had cut her.

"It's fine. I'll be fine." She could feel the sticky blood now.

"Let me carry you back to the house before the police arrive. There's no reason for you to be stuck out here for who knows how long." He made to lift her, but she backed away.

It would be easy to fall into his arms and let him take care of her. Part of her wanted to. But she needed to know that he could instead meet her halfway. "I'm okay to walk."

"You're the medical professional." He sounded sarcastic. What was that about? Was he still angry over the assessment she'd sent to the navy doctors?

"Your hand's not magically better, you know," she told him. "I'm grateful—of course—that you were able to pull the trigger. But it doesn't mean everything's fine now."

"But that's why you called me, right?" he asked. "For protection."

"Yes, but..." She tried to make out his expression, but the shadows obscured his face. Would he say that he'd come for

some other reason, too? Please let him say he had. That he'd come because he loved her. She wanted so badly to hear that. "I thought you might have..." She struggled to get more words out.

"I did what I needed to do, Kinley." He sighed. "That's all I've got to offer you."

She spun and started walking toward his house. She loved him—she wouldn't deny that to herself—but that wasn't enough.

Matthew pulled into the base day care center parking lot and dashed for the door. He was late to pick up Anaya. He'd spent the day in meetings, not his favorite thing, and the last one had run over. He'd been drumming his fingers on the table when he was finally dismissed.

"Sorry." He got through the door just at six. He hated for Anaya to be the last kid at day care.

"No worries." Hazel, the director of the center, smiled at him. "We're used to last-minute issues. Someone is always willing to stay late. Just give us a call."

"I appreciate that. How'd she do today?" They'd been on base for a week, but this was only Anaya's third day at the center.

"She had a decent day."

He could tell by Hazel's tone that there had been a problem. "A bathroom accident?"

"No, that was fine. She's good about telling us when she needs to go. One of the other children picked on her, though. Pulled her hair."

"She got bullied." He'd worried about that, since she was the new kid.

"Afraid so. We handled it by doing a restorative circle with Anaya, the other child, and our counselor. I also had a word with the boy's father."

“Okay.” He didn’t like it, but he didn’t see what else could be done. “Should I talk with her about it?”

“Let it come up naturally,” Hazel advised. “That’s usually best at this age.”

“Anything else?”

“She wasn’t tired at nap time but then was worn out and cranky a half hour after the other kids were up from their naps. Nothing unusual—she’s in transition. We get it. As a matter of fact, that’s our norm. Kids move in and out so quickly here as their parents are transferred or deployed.”

“Right.” He understood that was part of military life, but its impact on children had never occurred to him. He wasn’t sure he liked the idea of Anaya having to face constant transitions. He wanted her to be settled, sure of her environment. Since her mother’s death, he’d tried to give her that—and had succeeded, while they’d lived in Hartsville. They’d gotten into a comfortable groove in their little ranch house.

He tried not to think too much about those weeks, because it always led to thoughts of Kinley. All communications between them had been cut off. He’d seen her once since the night of Smit’s death, and that had only been for a minute at the police station.

He had no idea how she was. Fine, he assumed, but damn, he wanted to talk to her. Make sure she’d recovered from the traumatic experience.

It was over between them, he reminded himself for about the four hundredth time that week.

“Uncle Matthew.” Anaya came running out with her backpack strapped on. He scooped her up in a hug, but her bottom lip stuck out, which was never a good sign. “Mean boy pulled my hair.”

“I heard. Sorry about that, honey.”

“Happen again?”

“I don’t think so. If it does, you let Ms. Hazel know. Okay?”

“Okay.” She snuggled against him as he carried her to his truck.

He drove back to the house they’d been assigned on base. It was small but would do for the two of them. He tossed a few hot dogs on the backyard grill for their dinner. His neighbors were outside as well, so he struck up a conversation with them. The man, Bill, was a medic, and his wife had a civilian clerical position on base. They had two kids, twins just older than Anaya. Soon all three kids were going down the slide of the playset in the neighbors’ yard.

“I should get one of those,” Matthew said, watching the kids run around. Kinley’s backyard had been a fantasy playground for a child, so it hadn’t occurred to him that he ought to get an actual playset.

Kinley again. How long would it take him to forget her?

Easy answer: he never would, which was disheartening.

“You can have that one soon, if you want it,” Bill offered. “I’m being reassigned to San Diego. We can’t pack that up.”

“Big move,” Matthew commented, but it wasn’t unusual.

“Yeah. Not our first. It’s tougher with the kids. I’ll go on ahead, and Cammy will visit her folks in Illinois and then meet me out there in a few weeks. It works.”

“Sorry to see you go.”

Bill shrugged. “It’s the life.”

“Yeah.” It had been Matthew’s life ever since he was eighteen. He was starting to wonder if it was *the* life, though. Was there something more for him? He’d loved the structure and discipline of being in the military, but he was starting to question how it forced him to divide his attention.

That had never been a problem until Anaya became his to love and care for. Every decision now had to center on what was best for her. He’d always known what was best for him. The Navy had saved him.

Did he still need the Navy’s structure, or had his priorities altered? He watched Anaya sprint across the lawn toward him,

a red flower clutched in her fist.

“I told her it was okay to pick a flower,” Cammy called. “She said it was for Kinley. Is that your—?”

“Friend,” Matthew said quickly. “Kinley’s our friend.”

“I want see Kinley,” Anaya insisted. She’d expressed similar wishes repeatedly, and Matthew was out of excuses to offer about why it wasn’t possible.

“She’s too far away, honey,” was the best he could do. And he didn’t mean just geographically.

Kinley felt both close and far when Matthew went for his first on-base physical therapy appointment. He’d gone through a number of tests and evaluations before being assigned to a young physical therapist. After five minutes in his company, Matthew’s only word for Dr. Dawson was exuberant.

“What’s your prognosis, Doc?” Matthew had held the question in until the end of the initial exam, during which Dr. Dawson had exclaimed, “Fantastic,” “Excellent,” and “Amazing” multiple times.

“We should have you back in the field after about ten sessions. We’ll work hard during those sessions—you can count on that—but the hand has healed spectacularly.”

“Really?” Matthew wanted to believe those effusive words, but he’d struggled mightily and failed to manage the tiny snap on a piece of doll clothing for Anaya just the night before. He couldn’t imagine that would turn around after ten visits.

“Absolutely. Session one is today. You ready?”

“Let’s do it.”

Matthew went along with the doctor’s enthusiasm and did his best to complete the exercises, but he kept thinking how different this physical therapist’s methods were from Kinley’s. Dr. Dawson cheered him on like he was the quarterback of a high school football team. That wasn’t what Matthew needed. He liked Kinley’s practical, straightforward attitude. She’d challenged him, no doubt about that, but her feedback had been as measured as her expectations were high.

At the end of the session, Matthew wanted to get down to reality. “Okay, Doc. Tell me the truth. When you say get back in the field, what do you mean? Am I going to be able to defuse bombs again or not?”

“Never say that you can’t do something. It’s all about envisioning where you want to go,” the doctor said. “You’ve got to stay positive. Focus on the end game.”

That sounded like a load of bullshit. Matthew was capable of envisioning lots of things. Somewhere in his head he could envision him and Kinley living in Hartsville together, taking Anaya to the park, kissing on a sunny bench. He could see all that, but seeing it didn’t mean it was going to happen.

He made one more attempt to pin the doctor down. “So you’re saying I’ll be able to rejoin my SEAL team and do the job I did before?”

There was an awkward pause. “Or you could consider a training position. Those are great spots to be in, too. The Navy always needs quality people to train the next generation of sailors.”

“Got it. Thanks, Doc.” Matthew left the base hospital and walked outside. He was capable of interpreting that last exchange. Training was a more realistic goal for him. His dexterity and fine motor skills weren’t going to come back to the degree they needed to for him to be able to defuse bombs.

Kinley had been right. Of course she had, but he had been suffering from a rampant case of denial.

He’d never go on another SEAL mission.

He made himself process that thought. Then he waited for the crushing disappointment to hit. And waited. There was regret and some sorrow, but not the reaction he expected.

Huh.

He picked up Anaya from day care, went to his base house, and fired up the grill again. Anaya had had a better day and was in a chatty, goofy mood. Damn, he loved her. They spent the evening together, playing in the yard until nearly dark.

“Bedtime for little girls,” he finally said, even though he wasn’t ready to be alone yet.

“We see Kinley tomorrow?” Anaya asked as he zoomed her into bed.

“No, honey, I...” What was his excuse this time? He didn’t have one, and he couldn’t make one up—because he wanted to see Kinley as much as Anaya did. And why the hell couldn’t he?

Because they’d ended whatever was between them.

Did it have to end? Was there a chance to build on what they’d started?

“You know what? We’ll go see her soon. I promise.” He gave Anaya a kiss and went to his bedroom. He’d only half unpacked his stuff. Was that a sign that on some level he knew he wasn’t staying on the base? He still had the lease on the little ranch in Hartsville. He could return there.

But could he change his life? Take the medical discharge he was eligible for and leave the Navy? He was no longer the adolescent who would get himself in trouble without the structure of the military, he realized. He hadn’t been that kid in a long time.

He was a man in love, and that was going to give him everything he needed in life. God, it was good to finally admit that he loved Kinley. A weight lifted from his chest—but it could still return and crush him if he didn’t do this right. He had to find a way to get her back, which would start with some changes for himself.

He’d do that gladly if it meant he could be with Kinley.

Kinley rubbed lemon oil into the oak banister of the house she was renting. It was a showstopper of a place—a beautiful Victorian, larger than her house across town. She already loved it, and she loved that it was just two houses away from Mia and Kenton on a street where everyone seemed friendly.

She thought again about her recent conversation with her landlord, a man who lived in Savannah. The home had belonged to his aunt, who'd passed away. He had agreed to a short-term rental while Kinley's home was being repaired. Not that short-term was likely to be necessary. The insurance process was slow, and the rebuilding of her fire-damaged house would probably be even slower.

Kinley didn't want to be in limbo for that long, and from what her landlord said, he was anxious to sell this place. So she'd done something out of character. She'd offered to buy it, even done some quick online research and named a price. Something about the home captured her, and she'd acted on impulse. She had an appointment with the bank to discuss financing and had every expectation that this beautiful house would truly be hers.

She couldn't wait. When her other house was repaired, she'd sell it or rent it out, but this was going to be where she lived. She was already planning the gardens she wanted to plant. It was exciting and overwhelming, but it was good for her, too. She needed a goal, a focus. Because her life felt empty without Matthew and Anaya.

Despite her best efforts, they were never far from her thoughts. She wondered whether Anaya would like the backyard at this house or what Matthew would do to make it more secure.

And at night... oh, at night she missed his arms around her even more than she missed Anaya's open smiles.

But they were gone, so she had to move forward on her own. A new place to live was part of that.

She'd just finished the banister when she heard footsteps on her front porch. For a half second, her heart raced with the hope that it would be Matthew, but she knew it wasn't, especially when she heard female voices.

"Knock, knock," Mia called. "I've brought reinforcements."

Kinley opened the door with a smile. She couldn't have Matthew, but good friends were a gift, too. "Hi, neighbor." Mia had been incredibly helpful. She was the one who'd told Kinley about the house being available, and she'd helped her find furniture. She was remarkably resourceful and energetic. Through her, Kinley had met the partners of other SEALs who lived in town. She already knew Violet, but Mia also introduced her to Imogen and Harley. They made her feel like she was one of them and was just temporarily without her man, like when their significant others were on missions. It was very kind, but she couldn't forget that she and Matthew had broken up—after never really having been together to begin with. Their separation was permanent.

"What's all this about?" she asked as the four of them entered her house together.

"We thought you'd need some help getting organized," Imogen said. "And I brought my sewing machine in case you need me to make curtains or re-cover a throw pillow. That's my passion."

"I thought that was Patrick." Violet winked at her.

"All right, it's my passion when he's away," she clarified. "I make fancy, decorative pillows. I love lace, beading, and tassels more than anyone should."

“I could do with something on the sofa,” Kinley said. “It’s kind of plain.” She loved the deep blue velvet couch with dark wooden feet that she’d found on sale, but a splash of a livelier color would be welcome.

“I’m on it,” Imogen said.

“What can I do to help?” Harley asked. “Don’t let this pregnancy fool you. I’m quite capable. I can even still see my toes.”

“That won’t last,” Violet said.

“My kitchen stuff is sitting in boxes,” Kinley said. “Some of it I brought over from the other house, and other things Mia and I found. Can you make sense of it?”

“We’ve got this.” Violet and Harley headed for the kitchen.

“I’m on cleaning detail with you. What’s next?” Mia asked.

They worked together for the next two hours. Kinley loved hearing their laughter and chitchat in the house. It already felt like a home.

“Break time,” Mia called. “Everyone in the dining room.” Kinley and Mia had just finished polishing the woodwork in there and arranging the furniture. “I’ve got treats.”

“This is why we’re friends.” Imogen came into the room, picking a stray thread from her blouse. “Mia always has treats.”

“So I’ve learned,” Kinley said as she helped plate the petits-fours and lemon bars. She fetched a pitcher of mint-infused iced tea from the refrigerator, and they all sat down to enjoy the food and drink.

Kinley listened as they talked about their kids and pregnancies. She learned that Imogen was expecting, too, but wasn’t as far along as Harley. Violet and Anderson were trying for their second child. Kinley had told them that she wasn’t able to have a baby of her own but hoped to adopt.

“Wouldn’t it be fun if we all had babies close together?” Violet said. “They’d have plenty of playmates then.”

Mia laughed. “We’ve already got a passel between us, but the more, the merrier.”

“I’m looking forward to having this baby.” Harley rubbed a hand over her stomach. “She’ll be good company when Garrett is deployed.”

“That’s the right attitude,” Mia said. “Those can be tough times.”

“I’m learning that,” Harley said, “and Garrett’s only had short missions, with the investigation still ongoing. I’m dreading the long ones.”

“You get through it,” Imogen said.

“Loving a SEAL isn’t easy,” Mia said with a look at Kinley.

“Count me out of this discussion. I’m not in a relationship with Matthew.” Kinley wanted to make that clear.

“But you love him,” Violet said. “At least, that’s my analysis based on seeing the two of you together.”

“My impressions aren’t based on logic, like Violet’s,” Mia chimed in. “But I’ve seen the way he looks at you, and you at him.”

Kinley wasn’t sure how to disabuse them of their ideas. She and Matthew were through—that was simply how it was. She didn’t give her patients false hope, and she wouldn’t give herself any, either. “He’s gone to live on base, because that’s the life he wants.”

“*Says* he wants,” Harley put in. “Garrett’s sure that Matthew will be back for you.”

Kinley wasn’t sure how she felt about her love life being discussed in the other households, but it did give her a tiny nugget of hope that Harley volunteered that information. Out of all the SEALs, Garrett knew Matthew best.

“Exactly. And when he comes back, you’ve got to let him in,” Mia said, her voice gentle. “He needs you, and Anaya needs you. More importantly, he loves you, and I’m pretty confident you love him. Am I right?”

Kinley nodded. “But it’s complicated. Messy.” She liked things done by the book, and Matthew loved structure, too. Could they manage messy?

“Do you expect love to be perfect?” Imogen asked.

“No, but I’m afraid Matthew does.” He used to tell her she was perfect, no matter how she argued the point.

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” Violet said, “but didn’t you two break all the rules when it comes to love?” She ticked them off on her fingers. “He was your patient. You moved in together quickly. Out of necessity, I realize, but still. You got attached to his niece—and who wouldn’t? She’s adorable. And you fell in love with your protector. There’s nothing perfect about any of that. And yet you do love each other.”

“Maybe those are the reasons we aren’t together, though.” Kinley was trying to make sense of all this. She loved Matthew and wanted to be with him, so the arguments her friends were making fed the fantasy that the two of them could be together. But she didn’t want to set herself up for yet more disappointment.

“Just promise yourself that when he comes back to Hartsville, you’ll give him a chance,” Mia said. “That’s all we’re saying. And whether you two live happily ever after or not, we’ll all be friends.”

“Thanks. I—” Kinley’s phone rang, and she recognized the adoption agency’s number. “Hang on. I’ve got to take this.” She grabbed her phone and went into the kitchen. “Hello.”

“Dr. Kinley James? This is Mary Beth Miller. I’m taking over Ms. Hager’s clients.”

“Oh, nice to meet you,” Kinley said. “I didn’t realize that Ms. Hager was leaving the agency.”

“She’s taken some time off to deal with a family issue. I’m sorry that at your last encounter with her she wasn’t at her best.”

“That’s true enough.” Kinley didn’t want to be uncharitable, but Ms. Hager’s behavior had been kind of awful. Not that the

woman had ever been all that sunshiny. “Is the purpose of this call to introduce yourself?”

“Yes, and to congratulate you. You’ve got a baby on the way!”

“I do?” She struggled to believe it. She’d waited so long, and she hadn’t heard she was under consideration again. “Really?”

“Yes. A mother had been debating between you and another party, but she picked you today and signed the paperwork.”

“That’s amazing. Wonderful.” Her face was already wet with tears. At her last meeting with the agency, she’d been homeless, pursued by a mobster, and in a relationship with a man Ms. Hager didn’t approve of. It had finally happened despite all that. She’d been chosen.

“The mother commented that you seemed real—her word—based on your profile. And the letter of support tipped the scales in your favor.”

“What letter?” Kinley asked.

“From Matthew Templeton. I gather you were his neighbor and helped with his niece. He said some very flattering things about you and what an amazing mother you’d be.”

“Oh. I didn’t know he’d done that.” She’d told him not to, but he must have gone ahead anyway. She could never thank him enough.

“I’m sending details to your email. You’ll need to sign and return the attached forms—and then get ready for a baby in a few months. We’ll be in touch. Congratulations again, Dr. James.”

“Thank you so much. Goodbye.” She was bursting to tell someone and was glad to have friends in the house. She dashed into the dining room.

“What is it? You’re crying.” Mia was instantly on her feet.

“That was the adoption agency. A birth mom has picked me to take her child. I’m going to have a baby. I’m going to be a mom.” Happy tears kept streaming down her face as she hugged her friends and heard their congratulations.

The moment was almost perfect. She was reluctant to use that word, but it was the only one that represented her feelings. She'd waited so long for this. The only way it could have been better would be if Matthew were with her to share her joy.

Kinley woke several days later to find a text from Mia.

He's back. Told you he would be. Here's your chance.

Mia didn't add, "Don't blow it," but that was definitely implied. Kinley had no intention of blowing it. She'd taken the last week to settle into her house and think. She'd have a baby to care for in three months, and that would give her an outlet for her love. At one point, that would have been enough. But she'd discovered that she had so much more to give.

If Matthew was willing to accept it. She thought he was. Hoped he was.

She hadn't been sure about that until she seen the letter he'd sent to the adoption agency. It was incredible. She'd cried as she marveled at the heartwarming words he'd written about her. The story of how she'd played with Anaya in her fairytale yard had made her long to relive that evening. And all the other ones, too, when she'd baked with the little girl and tucked her into bed. He'd even spoken about how she had a gentle touch but high expectations as a therapist and suggested that was how she'd raise a child.

That's exactly what she planned, and now she was going to get the chance. And Matthew had played a huge part in that. She had to thank him, if nothing else. As soon as she was done with her last client of the day, she walked to his small ranch house. Mia had told her that he'd moved back into the same place.

As she walked up to the house, she saw that the wooden front door was open. She knocked, and seconds later, Anaya's sweet face popped up on the other side of the storm door. The girl's smile was huge, and she pressed her hands to the glass. Kinley waved to her, knowing that her own smile was just as big.

"It's open. Come on in," Matthew yelled, and she hesitated. He sounded grumpy.

But she'd come here for a reason, so she squared her shoulders and went in. Anaya held her arms up immediately for Kinley to take her, and she couldn't resist. It felt so good to hold and hug the little girl. She carried Anaya into the living room.

"I told you that you can just walk in—no need to knock every time," Matthew said without looking up. His laptop was open, and he was squinting at the screen. He had knitting needles in his hands, and a ball of white yarn rested on his knees. "She goes so fast. I can't keep up. Damn, this is hard." He hit pause on the video he was watching. "Gotta try again."

"Kinley here." Anaya announced her presence, making Matthew stand up so quickly that the yarn rolled away from him. He turned toward her, a tentative smile on his face.

"I thought it was Jonathan coming back," he muttered. His eyes swept over her, and she did the same to him, drinking him in. Her awkwardness faded, and all she was left with was how much she loved him. But where to start?

She glanced at his hands. "Are you knitting?" He'd been adamant that he wasn't interested in trying any kind of needlecraft.

"Yeah, I..." His cheeks turned pink. "I'm just learning."

"What are you making?" she asked. She could see that he had a few rows on the needles.

"A baby blanket. For you."

"Really?" That was the sweetest thing she'd ever heard. If she weren't already in love, she'd fall head over heels at the thought of the big, tough SEAL making her a baby blanket.

“Yeah. I meant for it to be a surprise, but...” He put the needles down on the coffee table and rubbed his injured hand. He seemed nervous. Did he feel, like she did, that so much was riding on this conversation? “Congratulations. Mia told me the news.”

“Thanks. That’s why I stopped by.” She lowered Anaya to the floor, and the girl went to play with her pink pony. “I wanted to thank you for writing that letter. The birth mother told the agency that it helped her make her decision. I can’t tell you what that means to me.” She hoped he understood, because she couldn’t put it into words.

“The baby you’re adopting is going to be the luckiest kid in the world to have you as its mom.” His words were going to make her cry, but she’d come here for a purpose and didn’t want to shed tears until she’d said what she needed to.

“It’s a boy, actually. I’m going to have a son.” She could still hardly believe it was true. She was thrilled, but she hoped for even more happiness.

“Lucky boy, then.” Matthew stepped toward her, his hands rising as if to reach for her and then falling to his sides. “I’m glad you came. I have some things I need to say. I planned to come over tonight after Anaya’s bedtime—Jonathan said he’d keep an eye on her.”

“I have some things to say, too. Will now do?”

“Yeah. I’d like to go first, if you don’t mind.” He glanced toward Anaya, who seemed content for the moment, before returning his attention to Kinley. “I owe you an apology, to start with. You saw what I refused to.”

“About your hand?” she asked. It was her job to see that.

“And about my life. I’ve been so sure that the only place I could be successful was as a SEAL. I thought I needed the military. At one time, I did, but that’s long past. You’re the one who made me realize I could do something different.” He sighed before going on. “My identity has been so tied to being a protector, a warrior, that I didn’t think I could be a good man without fulfilling those roles.”

“Being a good man has nothing to do with your career. That comes from inside.” She wanted to touch him to reinforce her words, but she waited.

“I’m figuring that out,” he said. “I’ve decided to leave the Navy and enroll in the civilian police academy. I’ve been talking to Brendan about it, and the Hartsville PD will sponsor my application.”

“You’ll be great at that.” She was pleased for him, but she still didn’t know what this meant for them. He’d be in town, though, and that could only be a good thing.

“I hope so.”

“You will be,” she said firmly. “You’re strong and smart, and you care about people.”

“I care about *you*. I love you, Kinley. You see me for who I am. You make me want to be a better person, a better dad to Anaya.” He finally reached for her, taking her hand in his. “And, if you’ll let me, I want to be a father to the son you have coming.”

“You do?” Her voice was squeaky with emotion. This was exactly what she wanted and had hardly dared hope for.

“If you want me to be. I’ll be here for you no matter what.” His thumb stroked over the back of her hand.

“I want you to be, but there are things I have to say first.” This was the moment, her opportunity, and she didn’t want to blow it. “You saw me for who I am as well. You encouraged me to take a chance, loosen up my rule-following tendencies—and you were right.” She wrapped her fingers around his, and her smile widened. “I broke a lot of rules with you, as a matter of fact. Mia teased me about it.”

“Did she?” He drew her closer. “She’s a good friend. They all are. But I don’t want to talk about our friends. I want to talk about us. Will you make a place for me in your life?”

“Yes.” The time had come for her to say the words that were in her heart. “I love you, Matthew, so much. I want us, Anaya, and our baby boy to be a family together.”

“There’s nothing I want more than that.” One arm went around her waist, while his other hand cupped her cheek. She rested her palms against his chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart and knowing it was hers. Words weren’t necessary anymore. The way they looked at each other said everything. Finally, he lowered his head and kissed her.

She had no idea how long they’d been kissing when she felt a tug on her pant leg. She looked down to find his niece smiling up at them.

“Me, too,” Anaya demanded. “Me kiss, too.”

Matthew laughed. “There’s always kisses for our girl.” He picked her up, and the three of them hugged and kissed. After a minute, Anaya squirmed to get down and scampered off again to play. Matthew turned his attention back to Kinley and gave her another soft kiss. “There are going to be a lot more kisses for you later,” he murmured against her lips.

“I sure hope so.” Kinley felt warmth and happiness course through her. It was hard to believe, but it was starting to sink in. Against all odds, she had an amazing man to love and the family she’d always wanted. Maybe life wasn’t ever going to be perfect—but this came wonderfully, beautifully close.

END OF THE SEAL'S TREATMENT

HARTSVILLE'S SEAL HEROES BOOK FIVE

The SEAL's Convenient Wife

The SEAL's Surprise Baby

The SEAL's Instant Family

The SEAL's Pregnant Roommate

The SEAL's Treatment

The SEAL's Hookup

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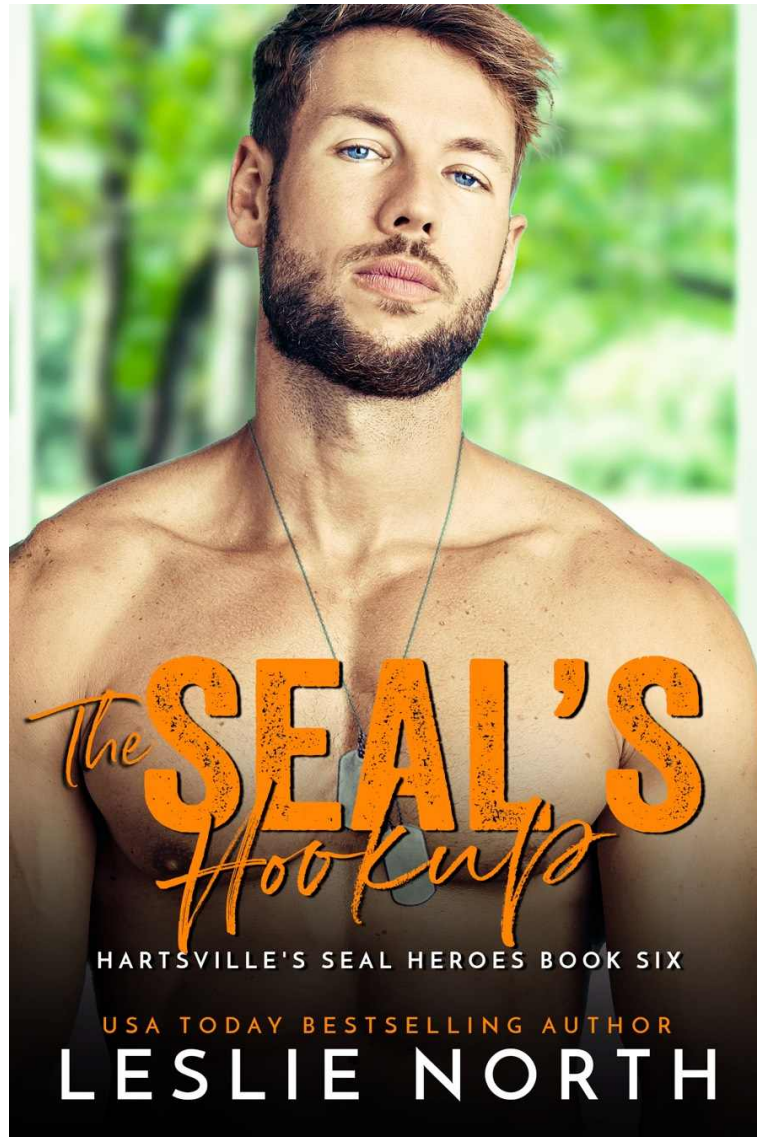
Leslie North is the USA Today Bestselling pen name for a critically-acclaimed author of women's contemporary romance and fiction. The anonymity gives her the perfect opportunity to paint with her full artistic palette, especially in the romance and erotic fantasy genres.

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BLURB

Romance and risk go hand in hand when a Navy SEAL's unborn child is threatened...

Navy SEAL Jonathan Winter and DEA Agent Tabitha Andrews have a long history together. And it's about to get longer. Tabitha is determined to clear Jonathan's name after a mission gone wrong. But her case just hit a bump in the road... a baby bump.

The two shared one night of passion—and now Tabitha is in a fight against time. She's the only one who believes Jonathan is innocent, so she has to keep working the case. And she won't be allowed to do that if her superiors learn she's pregnant with the gorgeous Navy SEAL's child.

Jonathan's upbringing tells him marriage is the only option when he learns Tabitha is pregnant. And when he realizes her life may be in danger thanks to the investigation, keeping Tabitha—and his unborn child—safe becomes his only goal.

They decided years ago that a relationship between them couldn't last. But working together to solve a deadly puzzle may send this headstrong couple in a direction neither anticipated...

Grab your copy of *The SEAL's Hookup*

Available 9 March 2023

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EXCERPT

Chapter one

Jonathan sat up and scrubbed his face, blinking in the early morning light. Fucking dream. Again. He rolled to the edge of the bed, waiting for the worst of it to fade. Even after three months, he could barely get through a night without being tormented by the nightmare—and the worst part was the fact that it had all been real.

It was always the same. The raid on the compound had been going according to plan. Then his team discovered there were innocent civilians who were forced to live and work there.

They worked on getting the people out, but it wasn't going fast enough. That was when they found the explosives. His buddy Matthew was there, trying to defuse the bomb as chaos went on around him. Jonathan always woke up at that moment, seconds before Sebastian was killed. He could see it coming but was powerless to stop it.

He gave himself a shake and stood up. Every day since, he'd asked himself the same questions. What the hell had gone wrong? What could he have done differently? That was the one that really got to him. If he'd made other choices...

Thinking about that made him question everything. And he had no answers.

He'd been interviewed by the investigators, from both the DEA and the Navy, countless times. The way they phrased things during their most recent meetings suggested that there had been an inside man, someone who had sabotaged the mission. For the life of him, Jonathan couldn't think who that might be. He'd considered everyone, even people he knew were impossible, like Garrett and Matthew, who both now lived here in Hartsville.

He'd talked it over with them again just two days ago, when they met up at the house that Matthew had recently moved into with Kinley. They had no better theories than he did.

The idea that someone might get away with murdering one of his men was bad enough. That it could be someone ostensibly working for the same government he served was an outrage.

And, on a more selfish level, Jonathan—whose father and grandfather had both been Navy admirals—knew all too well that if the real culprit wasn't found, someone else was going to be a scapegoat. Someone had to take the fall... and if that happened, he was the easiest target. It had been his mission to lead, after all. It wouldn't take much to pin the blame on him. The suspicion alone could ruin his career.

He just had to hope that the investigators were fair-minded. Tabitha was one of them, which gave him some reassurance. Not that he'd spoken with her directly. She was working in the background, but he knew she'd look out for him if she could. He wanted in the worst way to call her, and not just about the mission. They'd parted with a hug and a lingering kiss that morning after sharing his hotel bed. He'd taken what she'd offered that night, and it had eased his pain for a few hours.

He was grateful, and he hoped he'd given her some pleasure, too. They'd always been good together. He'd thought about her often in the eleven years since they left the academy. Having her on the recent mission had been great—right up until everything had fallen apart. She was smart and confident.

Beautiful. Had he gotten distracted by having her there and missed something he should have noticed?

Right now, he just wanted to know that she was okay. She was under a lot of stress, like him. But he couldn't call her. Any hint of tampering with the investigation would look bad for both of them. Knowing that had kept him from calling—but it hadn't stopped him from bringing her contact information up on his phone several times. He reached for his phone on the nightstand, hoping to see a message from her and knowing he wouldn't.

Exercise was the only place he found any peace these days. He put on running clothes, planning to put in at least ten miles. He'd hit the gym later. Maybe after that he'd see if any of his fellow SEALs needed a hand with home improvements. He had a lot of time to kill, since he wasn't permitted to go on mission or train until he was cleared.

Jonathan stepped out his door, taking a moment to start his playlist. He was still in the driveway when a car with an Uber decal on the dashboard stopped in the street. He blinked twice, not quite believing his eyes as Tabitha climbed out of the back seat, slinging a laptop bag over her shoulder as the driver got a suitcase out of the trunk.

“Thanks,” she said to the driver before turning toward the house and giving Jonathan a wan smile. She looked tired and more than a little anxious, which wasn't like her. She was the essence of cool under pressure. Always. What was going on? Why was she here in Hartsville?

Whatever the reason, it could wait. He'd take care of her first and ask questions later. He moved forward and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek before taking her suitcase. “Come inside. It's good... it's good to see you.” And it sure was. It was like his thoughts and wishes had brought her to him.

“You, too. We've got a lot to talk about, Jonathan.” There was a crease between her eyes, a tightness around her mouth. He put his arm around her waist to guide her toward the door. Once she was inside, he cast a surveying glance up and down

the street, his SEAL instincts kicking in. Something was off, very off. Why else would she be here?

“Are you in danger?” he asked once he’d locked the door and switched on the security system. He was grateful that Matthew had upgraded the system while he’d lived here.

“I don’t think so.” She put her bag on a table in the entryway. “At least, not imminently.” He didn’t like the sound of that. “Can I use your bathroom?”

“Down the hall on the right. I’ll be in the kitchen.” He poured a small glass of orange juice and a larger one of water for her. Food was next, since he was guessing she hadn’t eaten breakfast. He got a pan warming on the stove and took the carton of eggs from the fridge. He’d just cracked one when she came into the room. “Here, have a seat and drink something.”

“I don’t want to sit. I spent hours on a bus getting here.” She dropped gracefully into a yoga pose—a stretch that he couldn’t name but that he recognized as her favorite one to work the kinks out after sitting for too long. That had always been her thing, yoga and meditation. Her eyes were closed, giving him a moment to study her again. Her long blonde hair was neatly pulled back in a braid. He liked it loose, but she’d always declared that impractical. Her skin was pale, more so than usual. She was beautiful, though. That never changed. She drew in a deep breath and opened her blue eyes. They met his, but he couldn’t read what was going on with her.

“Keep stretching, if you want, but you need to eat and drink.” He gestured to the glasses on the table and went back to cooking eggs. He made enough for both of them while she continued through a quick routine.

“You don’t need to take care of me,” she said as he put a plate of eggs and toast on the table for her. He didn’t bother to argue and was glad when she drank first and then, finally, sat. “I suppose I better get started on why I’m here.”

“Eat something first.” He had so many questions, starting with why she’d taken a bus to Hartsville, but he wouldn’t rush her. She ate half her breakfast and downed the glass of water in silence.

“I’m ready now. Thanks.” She pinched her lips together, seeming to gather herself.

“This has to be about the investigation,” he prompted. It was the only logical assumption, and he was guessing by her demeanor that it wasn’t good news for him.

She sighed. “Partially. I’ll start with that.” She shoved her plate away. “I found evidence two days ago that I believe will clear you completely.”

That wasn’t what he’d expected. He’d been preparing himself for the worst. “That’s great. What is it?”

“A time-stamped still image. It was taken from video feed that shows you helping a local family pack up their things to move at the exact moment a phone call was being made from the SEALs’ camp. That call warned Valencia of the impending raid on the compound. Whoever placed the call is probably our mole. The image proves it couldn’t have been you.” That was more information than he’d gotten in the past three months. “The question is, why did you never account for your time that evening?” she continued. “In all the interviews, you never said that you were helping people move. What was going on there?”

“I couldn’t. I was sworn to secrecy.” The family had been scared. The drug lord, Valencia, had a stranglehold on the whole region, and no one was supposed to leave the area without his permission. The planned raid that would take place the next day was classified, so Jonathan hadn’t been able to reassure the family that Valencia wouldn’t be a problem much longer. He’d just given his promise that he wouldn’t say a word about their departure.

Now that all of that was in the past, would they have minded if he’d told the investigators? Maybe not... but they probably wouldn’t have been thrilled if American authorities had tracked them down to ask questions. Jonathan had decided to keep his word and stay quiet. And no one in the investigation had explicitly asked him where he’d been at that particular time, only his general whereabouts for the evening, so he hadn’t needed to lie. “I didn’t know there was anything

important about that particular block of time. Besides, I didn't want to involve the family in this mess."

"Okay. I get that you were trying to protect them, but you put yourself in jeopardy instead." She sat back and thought for a moment. "That shouldn't surprise me."

He liked that she thought that about him, but he sensed she had more to say. "What else?"

"I think you're in the clear, but Todd Aaronson, my supervisor, disagrees," she said. "He doesn't believe that the evidence is substantial enough, so I decided I needed to question you directly."

"And that's why you're here? You could have called me and saved yourself the trip."

"No, I needed to see you in person," she said. "And I needed to... clear out for a while."

"Why?" Something was going on with her. She wasn't acting like herself, not even close.

She let out a sigh. "When I got home from work the day after I found the image, there was a note pinned to my apartment door, warning me to forget what I'd seen."

"You were threatened," he said flatly, hiding his rising anger. Who the hell was threatening her?

"In a way. Getting the note confirmed my belief that I'm on the right track—but it also means the mole is on to me. My gut tells me that it was someone in the DEA. Not a SEAL. It's not a popular theory in my office, as you might imagine. Everyone there is convinced the snitch is a member of your team, if not you. I decided it would be... safer for me to be here with you."

His anger switched over to concern for her. Tabitha had never been one to run. She was a doer, tough and aggressive. How had a note stuck to her door shaken her so deeply? That didn't add up. He was glad she'd come to him, but it didn't make sense.

"I can guess what you're thinking." She smiled at him, but it was tinged with worry. "Why didn't I take a stand? Why did I

run like a scared rabbit?”

“Not a rabbit. But yeah, it seems... out of character for you.”
And if she needed to see him, why be so surreptitious about it?
Traveling by bus rather than flying must have been to stay
anonymous. He’d bet she’d paid for her ticket in cash and
given a false name.

“That’s the other thing I need to tell you. Another reason why I
have to play this safe.” She glanced away for a second and
then met his eyes dead-on. “I’m pregnant, and the baby’s
yours.”

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Available 9 March 2023

www.LeslieNorthBooks.com

The SEAL's Virgin Lover

BLURB

Danger and romance make for an unforgettable meet cute...

Former Navy SEAL Seth Jacobsen has been hired to find the kidnapped infant of billionaire Trent Caldwell. Tracking down the baby is easy. Getting the little one away from the sassy and beautiful nurse looking after her? Not so much. Seth doesn't understand how she can be so warm and affectionate one moment, and so cold the next. But he can't deny, there's something about her he just can't resist...

Chelsea Andrews refuses to back down. A mysterious stranger hired her to look after a baby, and nobody is going to get in the way of her doing her job. As far as she's concerned, men like Seth are one thing... Trouble. And despite their growing attraction, she isn't about to give her virginity away to just anyone—even if he is tall, muscular, and *unbearably* handsome.

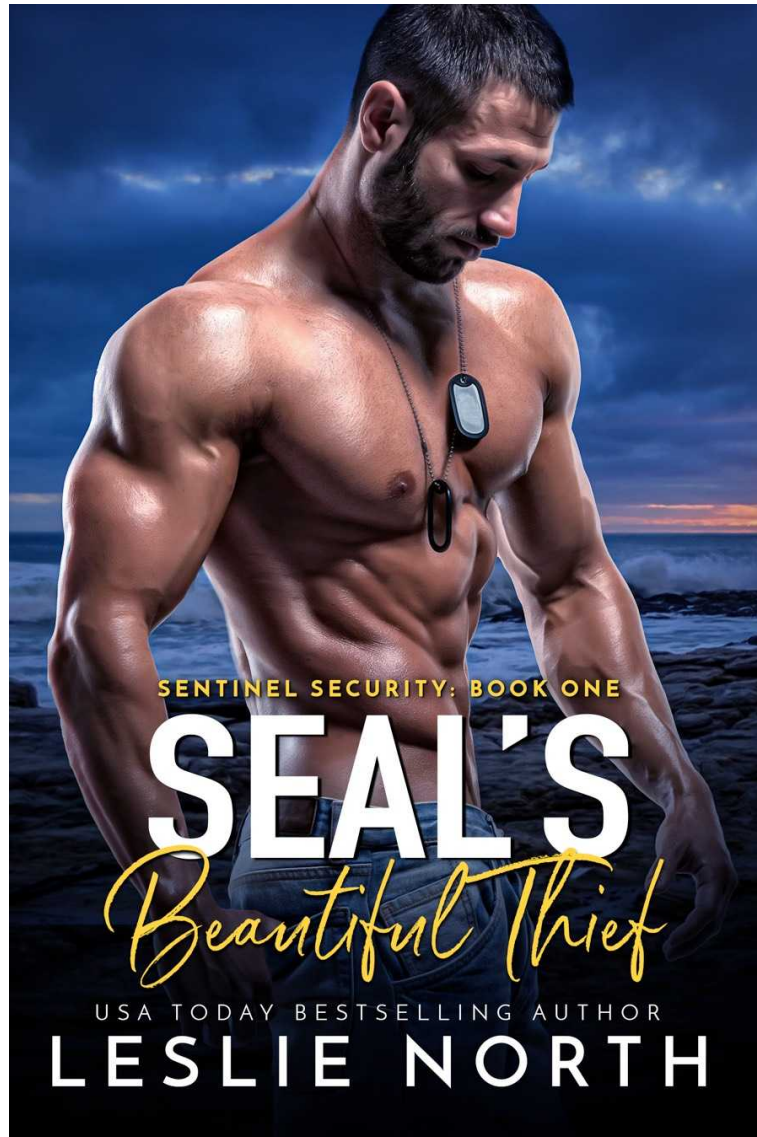
When they're forced to work together to return the kidnapped infant, Chelsea realizes there's more to this gruff alpha male than meets the eye. Could he be the man she's been waiting for?

This book was previously released in 2014.

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Available 27 April 2023

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BLURB

Will a thief's daughter steal his heart?

If it's not by the book, former Navy SEAL Maxwell Peters isn't interested. He's a rule-following kind of guy. Falling for investigator Violet Schroeder—the daughter of an infamous jewel thief—is *definitely* against his rules.

When Violet asks to partner with Maxwell on his latest security gig aboard a cruise, Maxwell resists. He doesn't know if he can trust her, even if she is the best person for the job. But no one knows jewels and how to steal them better than Violet, and when she reveals her father might be on the one targeting the cruise, Maxwell reluctantly agrees to let her come.

For years, Violet has wanted to catch her father after he cruelly betrayed her. Now, she's finally got a chance. All she has to do is play a hot Navy SEAL's fake wife and not get distracted. *Easy, right?* But her growing attraction to Maxwell is something Violet didn't count on. Soon, their pretend kisses aren't so pretend, and a future with Maxwell is seeming like everything she never knew she wanted.

When the job turns deadlier than either of them anticipated, will he be able to trust her with the mission—and his heart?

Grab your copy of *SEAL's Beautiful Thief* (Sentinel Security Book One) from

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EXCERPT

Chapter one

Maxwell checked his watch as the DJ flowed from one pulsing electric beat into another. He shut it all out and focused on the task at hand. The target was due to arrive any minute. The rest of his team was in the van just down the street from the small, exclusive nightclub, acting as his eyes and ears—and as transport, when the time came. As soon as they'd secured the assets—a thumb drive that their target had in his possession, along with a kidnapped executive who'd been forced to surrender that thumb drive and who was held captive somewhere in the club—they'd swing the van around to ensure a clean get-away.

Maxwell smiled grimly to himself. Everything was going according to plan.

Then he shifted a little, trying to ease the cramp in his shoulders. The corridor in the back of the nightclub was dark and absurdly narrow, especially since he'd been lurking in the dark corridors in the back of the nightclub for nearly an hour now, waiting for the target to arrive. Intel said it would be anytime between midnight and one, and it was nearly one now.

He could feel the thrum of the bass straight down through the soles of his shoes. From where he was stationed, he had a good view of the dance floor, the crowd dancing—if you could call it that. He'd never been the sort of person who could derive entertainment from grinding away in a throng of sweaty, drunken people to migraine-inducing music.

He didn't see *her* anywhere in the crowd. But knowing Violet, she was waiting for the perfect moment to make her entrance.

Maxwell frowned and pushed that thought aside. "Report."

"Still clear out here," came the reply. "We'll let you know as soon as the target approaches."

Maxwell felt the familiar tingling sensation on the back of his neck letting him know he was being watched, just before a lithe female body slid in next to him in the tight corridor, all soft curves and more bare skin than he cared to think about. In the pulsing lights, her gray eyes gleamed like a cat's. "It feels like I should be asking what a nice boy like you is doing in a place like this."

"Working." Maxwell answered shortly. "Like you should be."

"I'm always working." Violet leaned against the wall opposite him, one sinuous movement that had Maxwell gritting his teeth and forcing his eyes away from how Violet looked in that tight dress. It was gray as smoke and seemed to shift in the shadows, casting her curves into striking relief. Her hair spilled over her shoulders in loose waves. At the moment it was a dark, chocolate brown, though she tended to change it so often—depending on a job, or her mood, or the season—that Maxwell didn't know what her actual hair color was.

"You're late," he ground out irritably.

"No, I'm right on time. What you mean to say is, 'you're not early.'" Violet shifted so that her arm brushed lightly against his. Even through the thick sleeve of his black tactical jacket, he felt the frisson of electricity jolt through him. "Relax, big guy. Everything's still going according to your master plan. I did a quick sweep by the room where they're keeping Milo, by

the way, and they only have one guy keeping watch outside. Amateurs.”

Maxwell glanced at her sharply. “That wasn’t part of the plan.”

She shrugged, which made one slouchy strap slide over her shoulder. Which Maxwell did *not* consider reaching out to fix. “Call it pro-bono reconnaissance. Besides, this is good news. One guard means they’re definitely not expecting us. They probably think Milo’s partners are still going to pay the ransom.”

Tonight’s objective was simple. Locate Milo Van Acker, the CFO of a Fortune 500 company who had been kidnapped just over thirty-two hours ago, as well as the thumb drive that had been taken with him—full of highly sensitive information. When Van Acker’s associates had first reached out to them, they’d made it very clear that the thumb drive was their top priority.

Getting to Mr. Van Acker was going to be easy. Getting the thumb drive was a trickier proposition. It seemed their kidnapper/blackmailer liked to keep it on his person.

That was why they needed Violet, much as Maxwell hated to admit it. The most efficient way to approach this was if he grabbed Van Acker while someone else got the thumb drive. Someone who could manage it without inciting violence or causing a scene. Which meant Violet. Pickpocket and thief extraordinaire—though she insisted that was *ex*. Ex-thief. And ex-convict, too, after she’d been caught red-handed during a job she was pulling with her father. The same man who’d taught her everything she knew, the man who was currently wanted in at least fourteen different countries, on twice as many counts of grand larceny. The infamous thief only known as the Ghost.

Maxwell shifted, trying to find some way to put space between the two of them. There wasn’t a lot of space to be found in the cramped corridor. He caught Violet’s deep scarlet smile out of the corner of his eye. “Looks like you’ve gotten yourself stuck between a rock and a hard place there, Max.”

“Maxwell,” he bit off, irritated that she’d noticed. Again. The woman seemed to notice *everything*, especially when it came to him, and never missed the chance to taunt him about it. “Can you at least try to be professional?”

“I didn’t realize commenting on your plans was unprofessional. You do know that this place has a big old front door, don’t you? We could’ve just walked right on through, instead of getting all cozy back here.”

“With a line around the block and no way to gauge how long it would’ve taken us to get in? If they even let us in at all?” Something he’d gone over in the pre-mission meeting.

“If they let *you* in,” Violet corrected him. “I wouldn’t have had a problem.”

“There’s also a camera watching the front entrance, which would record our entrance and exit,” Maxwell continued, deciding to ignore that particular piece of bait. “This way is the most effective.”

Violet laughed. He could feel the soft rise and fall of her chest. “You’re the man with a plan.”

Coming from anyone else, Maxwell would’ve taken that as a compliment. But Violet managed to make it sound like an insult. Or worse, like a joke. He’d prefer the insult.

Not that he had any reason to care what she thought of him. There might not be anyone else better at her particular set of skills, but she was utterly untrustworthy. Once a thief, always a thief. Hiring her to work with him and his partners had been a devil’s bargain—but as long as she claimed she wanted to use her skills for good, rather than for personal profit, they couldn’t afford to turn her down. Her skill set was just too valuable.

“I am. Now let’s go over it again,” Maxwell insisted flatly, more out of frustration than actual necessity. One of the most exasperating things about Violet was that despite her tendency to improvise, and her rather flippant attitude, she had a mind sharper than a stiletto. He’d yet to have to tell her anything

twice. Though he often did. Sometimes more than twice, just in a futile effort to make a point. To himself.

Violet rolled her eyes, but acquiesced. “We wait until the target arrives. As soon as he does, you liberate Mr. Van Acker, making your way out the back door in the kitchen, where Alex and his band of merry men are waiting to whisk you to safety. Meanwhile, I relieve the target of the thumb drive and make my own way home, and thence to work tomorrow morning, where I will immediately hand it over to you.” She held up her right hand. “Scout’s honor.”

“Violet—”

“Target just entered,” Maxwell heard through his earpiece. He straightened and glanced towards Violet.

She was already slipping past him, her smile a luscious red curve in the dim light. “Showtime.”

He watched her as she eased out onto the dance floor, weaving through the crowd like a shark cutting through the water. Maxwell saw the heads turn as she went past. Her expression shifted into a slightly embarrassed smile as she squeezed past the target, a tall man with fiercely carved features and slick dark hair, bumping into him. She paused when he said something to her, and Maxwell watched her move closer, as the target gave her what he must’ve thought was a slick smile. Maxwell felt the clench low in his gut as he saw the target run a hand down Violet’s bare arm, and she laughed again at something he said, tossing her hair over her shoulders as she reached out to twist his tie around her fingers.

For a moment, Maxwell felt something dangerously close to envy. Except it couldn’t be that, because this was Violet, and they were on a job. A mission that he was in charge of. He needed to focus on getting his own job done.

He turned and quickly made his way down the narrow corridor until he reached an unmarked door guarded by a single man in dark clothes. “Excuse me, is this the way to the bathroom?”

The man shot him an irritated glance—but only briefly, as the next moment Maxwell’s fist was landing solidly in the man’s

face. Oversized guards like this never had the presence of mind to dodge, and they always went down like a rock. He quickly located the key ring in the man's pocket and unlocked the door.

Inside, in a sleek office, a thin man in a rumpled suit looked up at Maxwell with a mix of fear and hope, his arms and legs bound with plastic zip ties. He had a black eye and there was blood on his cheek, but otherwise he looked uninjured. "Mr. Van Acker."

The thin man's eyes went wide with panic. "Please don't hurt me. Please—"

"I've come to get you out of here." Maxwell quickly snipped the plastic cuffs holding Van Acker's hands, and then the ones around his ankles. "Follow me. Move quickly and do exactly as I say."

The man nodded, rubbing his wrists as he stood. "Okay."

Maxwell headed back out into the corridor, glancing around quickly, then led Van Acker towards the kitchens. They got a few odd looks as they wove through the throng of dishwashers and cooks, but for the most part, the staff was too busy to be bothered. There was a back door that conveniently led to an alley where the kitchen staff kept the dumpsters. The van would be waiting for them there.

At least that was the plan. But when Maxwell got to the door, it was locked.

For a moment, he gave into his frustration, gripping the doorknob and rattling the door on its hinges.

"You can't use that door." Maxwell turned to see a busboy frowning at him. "We had some people trying to sneak in without paying cover, so Carl locked it."

"I need it unlocked," Maxwell demanded. "I'm not trying to skip the cover. We want to get *out*."

The busboy shrugged, unconcerned. "Sorry, man. I don't have a key. You'll have to talk to Carl."

“Is something wrong?” Van Acker asked, his voice thready with fear. “You said you’d get me out of here.”

“I will.” He just needed to figure out another way. He’d planned this all out perfectly, considering every angle of the building’s schematic. Every last detail—except for the lock on this door. “Come on.” Maxwell ushered Van Acker back out into the dark hallway, wracking his brain for another possible way out. The target was likely still occupied with Violet, but someone was going to discover the unconscious guard sooner or later.

Suddenly, Violet was there, grabbing Maxwell’s arm, her voice smooth as silk. “This way, boys. There’s another exit over there,” she explained. “It’s where the DJs bring in their equipment. We can get out that way.”

“How do you know that?” Maxwell demanded.

“How do you think? I cased the joint,” she tossed back, going full gangster’s moll. “I talked up one of the roadies. And”—Violet held up a key card, eyes flashing in satisfaction—“I swiped his pass. Come on. It comes out on Seventh Avenue.”

Maxwell frowned, but then nodded, touching his earpiece. “New plan, Alex. Bring the van around to Seventh Avenue. We’ll meet you there.”

The exit was right where Violet said it would be, and the key card worked on the first try. She gave Maxwell a triumphant look as she leaned on the bar and shoved the door open—then winced as an alarm started blaring. Violet shoved Van Acker forward as there were shouts from down the hall. “Come on!”

They raced outside, the alarm still screaming at them. Seconds later, the van peeled in, the door sliding open before it had even come to a full stop. Max heaved Van Acker inside, then turned to help Violet, but she had already leapt in, somehow managing to make it look easy in her stiletto heels. Maxwell climbed inside and they took off, tearing around the corner as men rushed into the alley after them.

Violet sat back as they raced away, her smile like the cat that ate the canary. “Didn’t plan on that, did you?”

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